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Tom Otterness with his work-in-progress "Untitled" (Immigrant Couple), 2006.



"See No Evil" (2002) at the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Mich. (main entrance)
Tom Otterness

The AI Interview: Tom Otterness

NEW YORK, Sept. 27, 2006—According to the *New York Times*, Tom Otterness "may be the world's best public sculptor." Certainly he is one of the most visible. He is the only artist ever to have contributed a balloon to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and his large-scale installations in outdoor public locations—from Indianapolis to New York—are enormously popular.

Otterness enjoys the rare ability to engage spectators from all walks of life and all levels of art-world sophistication—because while his imagery is cartoon-like, and often highly appealing to children, his work also tends to carry a political punch. He is particularly scathing in his portrayals of those for whom financial wealth is all important. Pieces such as *Free Money* (1999) and *Big, Big Penny* (1993) depict this obsession, and others, like his New York subway installation, *Life Underground*, beneath ArtInfo's headquarters, show people actually turning into money.

His next New York gallery show will be at the [Marlborough Gallery](#)'s 57th Street location in November 2007.

Tom, let me begin by asking you about the response to the sculptures you showed in Grand Rapids, Mich. this summer. They were hugely successful.

They seem well-received. I get fan mail. Not bad for a gray-haired, hippy sort of guy. Those Midwesterners and I speak the same language.

You've devoted particular effort to make your work accessible to the broadest public.

It's a simple language; it's a cartoon language; it's smiley, button faces. [With my work], people aren't thrown off by a language they don't understand. It's not a visual language you need a BFA to get.

It seems to me that most public sculpture is just a wasted opportunity. There's nothing that turns people off more quickly than what they see as pretension on the one hand or condescension on the other.

It sometimes feels like a very dangerous line to walk. You can fall on one side or the other, and condescension is one of the dangers. If I pull it off, there shouldn't be any condescension in my work. I hope not, I pray not. I just want to be somebody who is talking straight-up in a public forum about sex or class or race, and that something is being said without selling something. It doesn't have any other agenda.

Can I ask you about some specific pieces? Every time I travel to the ArtInfo offices, I walk past your installation that spreads all over the 8th Avenue-14th Street subway station. How does it make you feel when you see your own work like this?

It makes me think about how long it took to do! I think it holds the record—both for me and the MTA [which oversees the New York subway system]. It took 10 years from the first commission to the end. And I kept putting more and more work in until my wife finally said, "That's it! You're giving away our daughter's whole inheritance!" I gave them about four or five times more stuff than they had paid for, but it was such an ideal stage for my work that I could hardly control myself. More is better in my book!

And what about your balloon that appeared in last year's Thanksgiving Day parade?

It reminded me how rarely artists attempt to be entertaining. That's certainly one of your basic instincts, isn't it?

Clearly so. It's the need to be liked! When we chose the image for Thanksgiving Day, I looked at old images of the parade. I really loved the earliest Macy's parades. Growing up in Kansas, it was the first way that I knew about New York City. They were real art, and I tried to go back to something like that—a real folk-art parade.

Nowadays [the parade] is so wedded with selling something. But that's also a portrait of who we are. I still like it as it is now. I loved getting inside people's homes on TV sets on Thanksgiving morning. It's a very special place. It's a privilege to get inside all of those living rooms on all those TV sets. It's hard to do, and it was a goal of mine.

Tell me, because your work has such a political edge, do members of the public ever take you to task?

Oh sure. As part of my research and development, I take the work back and forth from the studio and put it out in a public place. Very few people know what I look like, and I can go out anonymously and because people don't know I'm the artist, they tell me what they really think. And I learn a lot. At least I know how work is being read once it's out there.

I remember when the first Battery Park piece [at the southern tip of Manhattan] went up—it



"Free Money" (1999)
Tom Otterness





Details from "Life Underground" 14th Street and 8th Avenue Subway Station, New York
Tom Otterness



"Humpty Dumpty" at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade (2005)
Tom Otterness



"Mad Mom" (2005)
Indianapolis, City Hall
Tom Otterness



"Gulliver" (2002) Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids Children's Museum
Tom Otterness

was of Malcolm X as a lizard on a light pole reading a book. I got into some fairly heated debates with some black nationalists. You never know where the criticism is going to come from.

But isn't part of the function of public art to provoke discussion?

I think that's its purpose. Public art substitutes for the town square, the area where we're supposed to have our communal debates and discussions and exchange ideas. That's when I consider my work successful. If it's instigating discussion between us, then it's happening between other people as well, and maybe there's some conversation happening across party lines, so to speak. And that's a good thing.

Tell me what it was like to install your work in a place like Indianapolis. When I spoke to Julian Opie recently, he told me how struck he was by the number of existing monuments that were there. Did that influence how you installed your pieces?

Indianapolis really is full of public work. They have a history of that in the town, starting with the Civil War. In Indianapolis I could place sculpture relative to existing sculpture and have a bounce of meaning between the two. One of my favorite [examples of this] was in front of the City Hall. There was the governor from the 1860s on a high pedestal flanked by two soldiers with rifles, and I put *Mad Mom* in between them all. She was out there with her hands on her hips. The whole thing was great. People may or may not pick up on those relationships, but they entertain me, at least.

Looking at the documentation of your large-scale installations, you use many of the same sculptures, some of which are quite old, and then you add more recent ones that you've made.

Wherever I'm commissioned, I have more or less the same set of pieces to use, and it'll be a sort of chess game to see what arrangement I can come up with, what configuration and what relation between piece and place. There was a different sort of meaning in Indianapolis than got set up in the New York version, or the Grand Rapids version. I like to think they have a different life in each place.

Images (numbered from top): courtesy of Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park (1,9); photo by Bruce Schwarz (2); photo by D. James Dee (3,4,6); photo by Patrick Cashin (5); photo courtesy of Macy's East (7); photo by Janis Gardner Cecil (8)