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A Fractured Fairy Tale Set on Broadway

By Ted Loos

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TOM OTTERNESS was standing on Broadway near 137th Street the other day, trying not to feel the weight of sculptural history. He had just learned that his new project, "Tom Otterness on Broadway," was the biggest one-man sculpture exhibition in New York City parks since a show of Henry Moore works in 1984.

"That really hasn't quite sunk in," he said, looking uncharacteristically serious as the shadows of a pending thunderstorm darkened his glasses and long white hair. "It just overwhelms me a little bit."

Twenty-five works by Moore, the 20th-century British master, lined Park Avenue medians; now the same number of bronzes by Mr. Otterness will stand on Broadway's medians from Columbus Circle to 168th Street, from Sept. 20 to Nov. 22.

Mr. Otterness, 52, is well suited to the diversity and commercial energy of Broadway. He is both popular and populist -- an artist whose sculptures are intended to work everywhere and be understood by almost everyone.

The sculptures in "Tom Otterness on Broadway" range in size from under 2 feet to over 20 feet tall. Though each piece will be seen on its own, separated from the others by several city blocks, they are all part of the same fractured urban fairy tale, a story that ranges from adorable anthromorphization to black comedy to pointed social satire.

"Marriage of Real Estate and Money" (1996), to be set up on the mall near 91st Street, shows a smiley-faced penny holding a bowler hat, with its arm around a happy, skirted house. "Trial Scene" (1997), at 66th Street, depicts a courtroom full of animals, with a lawyerly dog cross-examining a cat. "Crying Giant" (2002) is a large, spindly figure with his head in his hands. It will be sitting at 117th Street.

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Despite the storybook vernacular he uses, Mr. Otterness has a deep respect for the role of sculpture in city life. "I think public art functions as a town square does," he said. "It's an object through which people can talk to each other."

"It's almost like therapy," he added. "You know how they use therapeutic dolls for kids so they can talk about things that they don't have words for? It's a way that we all get to talk about sex, class, money and society."

Those topics are ones that reappear frequently in Mr. Otterness's work. But the key to his popularity has always been humor.

"Everybody on the street, anybody that reads The Post, knows how to read the cartoons," he said. "They know how to speak that kind of symbolic language. They're not intimidated by it."

Mr. Otterness's style will be familiar to many people, since he already has nine sculptures scattered through the city. The best known may be "Life Underground," on the A, C and E subway platforms at Eighth Avenue and 14th Street, which includes an alligator coming out of a manhole to swallow a man holding a bag of money.

Adrian Benepe, the city's parks commissioner, said he discovered the versatility of Mr. Otterness's work years ago when his own young children played at the installation "The Real World" (1992), also known as the Penny Park, which is still in Battery Park City. In addition to pennies and riffs on various nursery rhymes, it features Mr. Otterness's version of the food chain: a dog stalks a cat, which eyes a bird, which in turn ogles a worm.

"You can enjoy it on two fronts," Mr. Benepe said. "As an adult, you can read all of the fairy tales and see the social commentary. As a kid, you make up your own stories or ask questions. So I think there's going to be a great deal of interaction from passers-by, probably more so than for abstract works."

"Tom Otterness on Broadway" is a joint effort of the Broadway Mall Association (which maintains the malls), the Parks Department (which has jurisdiction over them) and Marlborough Gallery, Mr. Otterness's dealer, which is paying all the exhibition's costs. Most of the works were originally created for other sites and have been recast for the occasion, at great expense. The larger sculptures can cost as much as \$100,000 to produce.

The project was first proposed to Mr. Otterness by Robert F. Herrmann, the president of the Broadway Mall Association, several years ago. Planning didn't begin in earnest until

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early in 2003, when Mr. Otterness started by simply walking the entire 108 blocks several times. He found that the medians suited his purposes because they were less uniformly planted than those on Park Avenue, with more open space for sculptures.

But it was the varied socioeconomic landscape that quickly became the most appealing factor for Mr. Otterness. "It was pretty exciting seeing what neighborhoods Broadway cuts through," he said. "It's like you're crossing historical lines as you go up."

Even though he wasn't creating site-specific works, he could still use the existing sculpture designs strategically, like chess pieces. "I could move the pieces around and make some choices," he said. "The context changes the way each work is read."

Mr. Otterness and Patricia Hamilton, the city's public art coordinator, attended community board meetings to begin the process of deciding exactly where to put the sculptures. They found that elements in the work -- like money and class -- were also driving discussions of placements along Broadway.

"The community boards expressed resentment that they never get art up here," Mr. Otterness said, referring to the Harlem median where "Free Money" (2001) will go. The work shows two figures dancing on a bag marked "\$." "They were anticipating being snubbed. So I threw as much art uptown as I could."

Not every work was welcomed. "Hansel and Gretel," Mr. Otterness's version of the fairy tale depicting the two children in a cage, did not go over well at one Harlem community board meeting.

"They said, 'We don't need kids in cages up on 145th Street,' " Mr. Otterness recalled. "I thought about that and said, 'Well, they probably don't need it downtown, either.' " The piece did not make the final cut.

In a few places, he tried to match the work's content to the location -- "DNA Chain" (1989) will stand at 168th Street, across from Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, for instance. But in general, Mr. Otterness said that works like "Miser" (1997), which ended up at 83rd Street, seemed to play well, if differently, no matter where they were put. The sculpture shows a top-hatted penny hoarder standing on top of a globe, reluctantly doling out coins.

"Here they might see it as a poke at the rich," he said of Harlem residents. "Then the rich interpret it in their own way. But I don't underestimate rich people's sense of humor either. You'd be surprised at the number of real-estate guys who have collected 'The Marriage of Real Estate and Money.' "

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Though often associated with local sculpture, Mr. Otterness grew up in Wichita, Kan., and moved to New York in the 1970's to attend the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program.

He helped found the artists' cooperative called Collaborative Projects, or Colab, working with Kiki Smith, Jenny Holzer, John Ahearn and other artists who went on to successful careers. In 1980 the cooperative made a splash with the monthlong "Times Square Show," for which they took over a former massage parlor.

"We were trying to get art out of the art world, out of the gallery world," said Mr. Otterness, who is married to a fellow former Colab artist, Coleen Fitzgibbon. "A future in public art seemed a natural extension of that."

He has stuck with that vision, and these days he has a large studio in the Dumbo section of Brooklyn and 20 full-time employees.

"Tom Otterness on Broadway" comes at a time when the city, through the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Public Art Fund, has been aggressively pursuing other outdoor sculpture projects. Currently there are three works by Mark di Suvero in Madison Square Park, four pieces by Roy Lichtenstein in City Hall Park and several other small exhibitions of note.

"There's no question we're becoming more ambitious," said Mr. Benepe, who cited Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's championing of public art as an important factor. And in a time of tight budgets, the participation of a commercial gallery, the Marlborough in Mr. Otterness's case, is another key to success.

"That's one of the beauties of our public art program," Mr. Benepe said. "The only money we spend is for the staff person who interacts with the artist and the gallery. You get a lot of bang for the buck."

In February comes the biggest show of all, and the only one that will handily trump Mr. Otterness's in scale: Christo and Jeanne-Claude will install 7,500 gates hung with saffron-colored fabric panels in Central Park.

For Mr. Otterness, it's a gratifying trend. "I don't know any other city that's tackling public art like this," he said. "It's like a traveling show that is the city itself."

THE NEW SEASON/ART Ted Loos writes about art, film, television and wine.