

Can art be epic?



It was good to talk to sculptor Tim Schmalz about public art last week. He put some radical notions in my head, and got me thinking.

My feelings about art are laced with a toxic mix of hope, disillusionment, fun and frustration. I have an overarching sense that art is generally failing to do what it should do—move, challenge, enlighten, and uplift.

Much of what is out there in the art world strikes me as impotent, constrained by dull imitation. I'm aware that much of this thinking springs from my own impotence and imitation as an artist, but also from having been around the block of the art scene a few times.

"Today, artwork can be spectacular," Schmalz said. "It can rival all the other artwork of all the other periods of history. But it is the responsibility of the cities and of the artists to think of the big picture, the bigger philosophical ideas initially, and then what they are going to have is more epic artwork."

Big, epic ideas generate big, epic art, he said, and there is hardly enough of that kind of thing going around, despite all the new materials and technologies at the artist's disposal.

Schmalz's ideas aren't so radical when looked at from the perspective of historical art. His work is, after all, influenced by the great artists and ideas of the Renaissance, and that era was all about the epic. But in today's strange and disjointed art world, Schmalz's ideas have a certain daring ring to them.

"The problem with our society is we are all too timid to actually think about the big, epic ideas, because, oh no, we might offend someone," he added.

Schmalz lives in St. Jacobs, where he has a studio. He has another studio in China. His work is commissioned internationally, much of it based in Christian themes.

You will not see his monumental pieces in the public art galleries in this country. His art would be considered too overwrought with heavy-handed religiosity to fit with the thematic correctitude that contemporary art currently considers relevant.

Nevertheless, Schmalz's work has some punch, and is very popular among a general public far removed from the art elite.

I first learned about the artist during my years as a reporter in Sudbury. In the early 2000s I reported on a long and difficult campaign to have a mining monument prominently installed in that city's Bell Park, the gem among the community's many lakeside parks.

Schmalz's National Mining Monument went up just over 10 years ago, and to my knowledge still draws thousands of curious onlookers each year.

Even in the planning stages, the sculpture caused controversy because of its proposed location, and for esthetic reasons. Not everyone in the city's artistic and environmental circles believed environmentally destructive nickel mining should be commemorated by a sculpture that ascribed a kind of heroism to mineral extraction.

The two-sided, 15-foot-high bronze sculpture is a kind of horseshoe shape with a pair of huge hands at the bottom reaching into the earth. There is an elaborate array of hundreds of highly realistic miners sweeping down both arms of the piece at a progressively larger scale. These are tough, sinewy working men, armed with picks, jackhammers, chisels and shovels. They are working deep underground.

At the top of the sculpture, on the surface and wedged between a series of smokestacks on one side and a mining head-frame on the other, rests the sprawling city that mining built.

I remember being a touch skeptical of the piece myself when it first surfaced as the sculpture of choice for the monument. It seemed old fashioned, neoclassical, a touch garish and not very hip. I was under the influence of a more late-modernist esthetic, and thought things should be somewhat looser, less blatant, and more esoteric.

But when I first saw it in the flesh at its unveiling, I was bowled over, or rather my esthetic prejudices were. The amount of skill, effort and craft that went into its making was impressive. The artist has an uncommon level of Old World artistry.

That Old World level of skill and craft tends to be missing in so much contemporary art, and lately I find that very disappointing. When it does appear, it can have a potent impact.

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