

Public Art Review

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Public Art 2.0

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in the Interactive City



Future Transition: Patience Pays Off for Greater Phoenix

When I first moved to Phoenix, a friend suggested I contact his former college roommate, Terry Goddard, state Attorney General and former Phoenix mayor. I had coffee with Goddard and we talked about the evolution of public art in Phoenix. Under Goddard's leadership, the city began its arts commission and public art program in 1985 and 1986, with works scattered about the city in service of capital projects. In the years since, the metropolitan area has become known for its public art programs. Phoenix and nearby cities like Scottsdale, Tempe, and Glendale, boast public art initiatives, each with its own goals and support structures that reveal unique ambitions and economic strengths.

Goddard told me that when he was mayor there was discussion about trying to create a "real" downtown, although some folks didn't think one was necessary. The question was: What role would the arts play in defining and describing the maturation of the region? After almost 25 years of active public art projects, public art has found its unmistakable voice in defining a new vision for our desert city. Public art has given Phoenix a heart.

A new downtown core has been formed through a flurry of building projects—largely Arizona State University (ASU) buildings, led by university president Michael Crow—with crucial support from former governor Janet Napolitano and mayor Phil Gordon. While some were skeptical about a city built on the backs of undergrads, there has been a simultaneous uptick in small, local businesses in the area. Yet all of these initiatives, from top-down mandates to bottom-up bars and art galleries, still don't translate into a uniquely identified place with a tangible meaning. This is where public art is at its best.

Janet Echelman's floating sculpture *Her Secret is Patience*, 2009, was inaugurated this spring amid much fanfare at the recently renovated Central Park on Phoenix's Central Avenue corridor. Central Avenue has always been the spine of the city, functioning as a furtive economic thermometer, tracking the divide between social, cultural, and racial communities. The night of the opening, Echelman's work hovered serenely

over the diverse crowd, slowly changing color and becoming more vibrant as the sun set and the lights on the work, choreographed by artist Paul Deeb, lit up the sky.

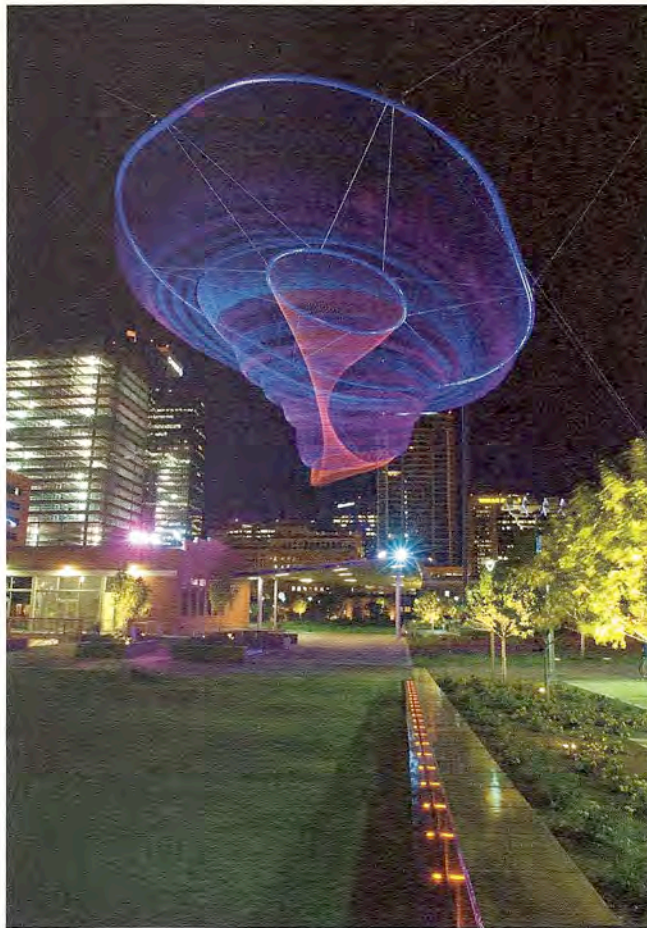
The tiered work, made of flexible, durable materials akin to fishing nets, recalls the shape of the saguaro cactus flower and gently sways in the night's soft breeze. The work embodies the glory of the desert and invokes sunlight by changing colors with the temperature throughout the year.

The work is also a perfect mirror for the city's own moods—it serves as a link among disparate social and cultural zones. On the northern border of the park is the Westward Ho Hotel. Built in the late 1920s, the Ho was one of a chain of high-rise hotels that drew Hollywood stars and other celebrities to Phoenix in the 1950s and is now HUD housing for qualified seniors and the handicapped. To the east is ASU's new Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication; to the north is a major public transportation hub; to the west runs the new light rail with the refurbished YMCA beyond.

This quadrangle embodies the economic changes in the region, but promises to preserve this balance as the city does a death march into an economic freefall. Echelman's work is the very embodiment of the collaborative, visionary ideas put forth

in ASU's "New American University," where public bodies engage in meaningful ways with the city that gives it shape and scope.

Echelman's work was almost canceled last fall when city and university officials used the work as a red herring to mask construction delays. One city official, who knows quite well that public art funds are restricted and had largely already been spent, suggested canceling the work and spending money instead on a series of "ticky-tacky" (my words) plop art. With public support for the work and expert maneuvering by Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon, the work was saved. This showed however, that despite two decades of works embedded in the city, city officials are willing to throw public art under any financial bus.



Janet Echelman, *Her Secret is Patience*, 2009, Downtown Civic Space, Phoenix, AZ.

in Greater Phoenix
ARIZONA



Other works of cultural resonance have also recently been completed. As part of the Valley Metro's light rail system, Einar and Jamex de la Torre's work in central Phoenix, next to the Heard Museum and completed in 2008, provides sly critical commentary on the history of place. The artists used symbols drawn from Meso-American Indian, North American Indian, Aztec, Mayan, Greco-Roman, and contemporary life to decorate various elements on the platform. In particular, the moveable, rectangular bronze "abacuses" draw together symbols to be deciphered as in the Aztec calendar, giving Phoenix what the artists describe as a graphic novel of its own history. The comical, meaningful "archaeology" of the work connects the region's past to its rapidly changing future.

In Scottsdale, beloved Arizona-based Italian architect Paolo Soleri, best known for his utopian, self-sustaining city Arcosanti, north of Phoenix, has designed a bridge over a narrow canal. The canal system, originally dug by the Hohokam over 1,000 years ago, has been ignored and paved over, but cities in the region are slowly turning back towards the water. It will be one of Soleri's few built projects, which makes the commission a risk but holds great emotional resonance for the community. Like the Echelman and the de la Torre projects, the Soleri Pedestrian Bridge is truly rooted in the specific glories—and problems—of the Valley of the Sun.

MARILU KNODE, executive director of Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis, was previously the associate director/head of research for Future Arts Research (FAR) at ASU.

ABOVE: Einar and Jamex de la Torre's interactive, multifaceted artworks for Valley Metro light rail stop at Encanto and Central Avenues in Phoenix, AZ, completed in 2008.

BELOW: Paolo Soleri's concept for a bridge and plaza on the waterfront in Scottsdale, AZ is a joint project of the City of Scottsdale and Scottsdale Public Art. Construction began in 2008.

