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The art of crossing the bridge into Ballard

By Jessica Gilroy
10/08/2003

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Drive-by art: Here's a closeup of one of eight aluminum pieces of art on the north side of the Ballard Bridge. Like most art,

"What the heck is that?" Magnolia resident Lacey Fain asked herself as she crossed the Ballard bridge last July. "Are they doing more construction?" Lacey, 22, wondered.

Her wonderment was not misplaced. No doubt many motorists mak-ing their ways between Interbay and Ballard have shared it since last July.

Early that month, orange caution cones were put up along the edges of the north side of the Ballard Bridge - a not-uncommon site for Seattleites: something always seems to be under construction. However, this work was discretionary.

It turns out that the cones were marking off what would soon become permanent artistic aluminum pillars that would grace the north side of the Ballard Bridge and become known as "Ballard Gateway." The debate is still on about the artistic quality of the pieces. Some have voiced concerns the powder-coated aluminum structures are too abstract. The pieces, internally lit at night, have been characterized by others as "odd," "unfinished," even "frightening."

Others, perhaps more open to artistic expression, have voiced support for the artworks, which liven up an otherwise ordinary drawbridge.

The project was "community-driven and -supported," said Karen Bergstrom from the Seattle Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs. "SDOT [Seattle Department of Transportation] was work-ing on some improvements along 15th Avenue, and the Ballard District Council Planning Committee actually approached SDOT and their community," she said.

After some phone calls and fund-raisers, the project was set in motion. Spokane artists Tom Askman and Lea Anne Lake, known countrywide for their outdoor artwork, were hired to conceive and create eight sculptures to emphasize different aspects of Ballard history. The colors (yellow, blue and silver) represent Ballard's Scandinavian heritage. The works themselves have shapes that are reminiscent of boating, fishing and the like. The artists say, in a written statement, that "Ballard Gateway ... pays tribute to the history of Ballard and to different aspects of its community life. Specifically, it addresses the Scandinavian heri-tage, Native American history, fishing, boating, fabrication shops, lumber mills and the natural environment."

Private fundraising brought in \$25,000 for the project, while the city - Seattle City Light Millennium Lighting Funds and SDOT - contributed more than \$75,000. SDOT is counting the contribution toward its required yearly donation, set in place by a 1973 ordinance stating that 1 percent of the city's capital funds are to be donated to public art - which helps explain why artistic pieces continue to emerge in various parts of the city.

Motorists stuck on the north side of the Ballard Bridge waiting for its iron mouth to close can take a closer look at the aluminum structures that reach toward the sky. If you look closely, you can see the pillars that represent the fishing industry, a collage of boat propellers and a salmon arching its way into the air. It's best to look while you're stopped, or taking a walk. Don't attempt to examine the complexity of the statues while speeding toward 15th - the drawbridge creates enough back-ups, and smashed cars were not intended to add to the effect. And yes, Lacey Fain, it is artwork, not construction. Take a look and decide for yourself. One thing's for sure-they aren't going anywhere.

Jessica Gilroy, a Seattle freelance writer, can be reached via qanews@nwink.com.

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