

STARPREVIEW



ENGAGING ART

Bringing urban landscapes to life with creative installations | 12

INSIDE: Comics, puzzles, advice and TV listings | 22-27

SATURDAYS IN MAY 🌟 6:20PM-11:00PM

WIN A SHARE OF \$100,000 CASH!

DELTA DOWNS
RACETRACK ♦ CASINO ♦ HOTEL
Comfort. Any way you play. | DeltaDowns.com

Valid 2016 only. Other restrictions apply. Visit DeltaDowns.com for details.

BOYD GAMING

COWBOY UP
\$100,000
PICK & WIN

COVER STORY

Communities see installations as way to make places more engaging and interactive

By Molly Glentzer

PUBLIC art is looking up, way up — and down, way down — in Houston right now.

A handful of major new installations are livening up the urban landscape in ways that encourage us to consider structures — and our relationship to them — from new perspectives.

Amanda Parer's "Intrude" took form this week on the lawn at 1600 Smith. It leaves Saturday, but four other downtown installations will be up longer — at least through next year. And Donald Lipski's high-tech "Down Periscope" is permanent, offering 360-degree views into the subterranean wonders of the Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern, which isn't technically art, but is a must-see.

Interest in public art has blossomed in the past decade or so as civic leaders across the U.S. have adopted the concept of place-making. To make a place a people magnet, it's not enough just to create nice parks and plazas. People yearn to be engaged and amused. They want something to do, to listen to or to look at. They also want to share the experience.

And nothing makes better selfie bait than a big, fascinating piece of art.

This has not escaped the attention of artists, said Sara Kellner, the Houston Arts Alliance's director of civic art and design. She said it's not uncommon to receive proposals for public art projects that mention "the selfie spot."

Art consultant Lea Weingarten, who curated the Art Blocks at Main Street Square, said if a client's goal is to engage and attract people to a site, she, too, considers how a work will resonate on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

When you want to gauge how people are responding, Weingarten said, "there's almost immediate gratification with social media."

The Tuesday lunch crowd outside 1600 Smith wasn't sure what to think of the six huge inflated rabbits of "Intrude," which have taken over the patch of urban green space where people escape from their computers and air conditioning. But the smartphones were out, recording the view.

The largest bunny, who was perched like the sphinx in the middle of the grass (and showing his back end to people relaxing in Adirondack chairs), measures more than 40 feet long.

Tiffany Pinkston, a senior IT business analyst with Chevron, thought the sculptures were cute but wondered what they meant.

"White rabbits? 'Alice in Wonderland'? Should we be running?" she said.

Parer, the artist, would have been happy to hear that last idea. Rabbits are considered invasive in Australia, where she's from. They are still just kind of cute in the U.S., but by reversing the scale of man to animal, Parer hopes her soft sculptures make people think twice about the environment and what the world might feel like if we were the rabbits.

"Intrude" is inflated daily and best viewed at dusk, when the sculptures glow, lit from inside.

The Houston stop is part of a four-city national tour presented by Arts Brookfield, the cultural arm of the global real-estate corporation that owns 1600 Smith. While Arts Brookfield maintains an active, rotating series of exhibitions inside the company's marquee buildings downtown, "Intrude" represents something bolder.

Vice president Ted Zwieg was there Tuesday, watching the response.

"The main thing was, number one, we have the room. But it creates energy and a lot of wow as people drive or walk by," Zwieg said. "These days, we always talk about work, home and, what's that other place, where you can



Marie D. De Jesús / Houston Chronicle

Australian artist Amanda Parer's monumental installation titled "Intrude" consists of several inflatable rabbits. During the day, the work looks imposing and slightly out of place in its downtown spot, but at dusk, the rabbits emit a soft glow when lit from within.

have a cup of coffee or lunch with friends?"

With the Art Blocks at Main Street Square, the Downtown District hopes to bring positive energy back to a stretch of properties that are ripe for a rebirth. Envisioned as a "civic outdoor room" 13 years ago, the area has remained a kind of no-man's land in spite of its pedestrian promenade and a dramatic water feature that arcs over the Metro-Rail line.

Art was only part of the most recent \$700,000 initiative, which included capital improvements, but it's certainly an attention-getter.

At the corner of Main and McKinney, Chicago artist Jessica Stockholder's "Color Jam Houston" washes the street, sidewalk, light posts and the corners of buildings with coral, turquoise and bright green. You can't walk by it without walking "through" it.

Stockholder said she's interested in boundaries — "between personal and public, between fiction and reality, between inside and out." And an intersection presents all kinds of them.

"The intersection is such a



Courtesy of the artists

YesYesNo's "mas que la cara (more than the face)" uses facial-recognition software to interact with passers-by as part of the Downtown District's Art Blocks at Main Street Square project.

weird kind of place — always very dynamic with the threat of a car coming through at every moment. To have this static piece occupy the dynamic intersection allows for recognition of this dynamism," she said. "I care about how the work provides shifting experience to a single viewer on

the street and also asks for thinking about how many share that space."

Halfway down the block, Houston artist Patrick Renner's gargantuan "Trumpet Flower" sculpture descends from a rooftop to form a loopy canopy over

Art continues on D28

COVER STORY

Art from page D13

a plaza of brightly colored tables and chairs. Made of woven wood scraps on a metal armature, it was a highly collaborative effort — Houstonians pitched in to paint the wood; Nick Moser handled logistics, and Kelly O'Brian helped with the engineering.

A step up from the popular “Funnel Tunnel” Renner created two years ago outside the Art League Houston building on Montrose Boulevard, “Trumpet Flower” looks like it really, really wants to be permanent. And Weingarten would like to see it activated even beyond lunchtime. The canopy creates an inviting event space.

The international collaborative YesYesNo draws viewers to a window of 1111 Main, the shell of the old Sakowitz building, to interact with “mas que la cara,” or “more than the face.” Just try not pulling out your smartphone as the motion-capture technology “reads” your face and comes back at you with whizzy color and patterns that turn into wild-looking masks.

At the north end of the Art Blocks, high above the Main Street Market, Jamal Cyrus’ “Lightnin’ Field” is the first of four marquee projects that defy expectations. “Lightnin’ Field,” which re-creates a historic poster, pays tribute to Houston bluesman Lightnin’ Hopkins and the long-gone venue Liberty Hall. It’s up until July, to be followed by a rotation that includes paintings by Armando Castelan, M. Giovanni Valderas and Nataliya Scheib.

Over at Buffalo Bayou Park, Lipski’s “Down Periscope” could attract lines of viewers this weekend eager to peer into the massive,



Jon Shapley / Houston Chronicle

Artist Jessica Stockholder stands near her Art Blocks piece at Main Street Square.

meditative Cistern — an eery, magical-looking structure built in 1927 as Houston’s first underground drinking-water reservoir and rediscovered in 2010.

Lipski collaborated with the Houston tech firms Fuel FX and Wildcat to engineer the computer interfaces for the periscope, which also can be accessed online at houstonperiscope.com. Press a button — there’s audio, too — and a searchlight goes on below, allowing you to manipulate the scope to see whatever’s happening below. This weekend, you’re likely to view a steady line of tourists.

Lipski could have created a more conventional sculpture for the park, but fell in love with the Cistern — like every other artist who has seen it. “It’s grandeur, utilitarian structure, symmetry and

majesty astounded me,” he said. He thinks of “Down Periscope” as “merely a tool” for seeing.

It’s a fun tool. And it’s a much bigger lens than you’ll find on any smartphone. But ultimately, it can’t beat a live art experience.

Buffalo Bayou Park art committee leaders Judy Nyquist and Geraldina Wise can’t wait for the day when there’s more art inside the Cistern. They envision environmental sound and light art that will help “activate” the 221 concrete columns that stretch dramatically from the ceiling to the watery floor. (Echoes resonate for as long as 17 seconds.)

To keep people coming back, and finding new ways to appreciate it, even a site that’s a masterpiece in itself could benefit from a little placemaking.

molly.glentzer@chron.com

HOME | LOCAL | US & WORLD | SPORTS | BUSINESS | ENTERTAINMENT | LIFESTYLE

BREAKING NEWS FIRST

★ Chron



And Everything Houston Next

- Restaurant reviews
- Trending topics
- Home Value Database
- Find a car
- Find a job
- Find a home

Sign up for news alerts!
Chron.com/Alert