

## Toronto sculptors win big in Oslo

**It's Smurf blue and contains a bug-eyed gnome, a caterpillar monster, a giant head – and it's won Oslo's Peer Gynt sculpture competition for Toronto-based artists Anna Passakas and Radoslaw Kudlinski**

When it was announced this spring that the Toronto-based collective **Blue Republic** had installed a giant, permanent sculpture in Oslo – the winner of the Peer Gynt International Sculpture Competition – the first question zipping around the Canadian art world was simple: How permanent can it be?

Blue Republic, comprised of the Polish-Canadian couple **Anna Passakas** and **Radoslaw Kudlinski**, are best known for working with found materials to create delicate, and decidedly impermanent, sculptural installations.

Their most recent touring exhibition, *Nostalgia for the Present*, a kind of magical metropolis made from spindles, cardboard, and Styrofoam, looked fragile enough to be knocked flat by an asthmatic toddler with a head cold. What were these masters of the temporal doing making monumental, sculpture-park works, timeless wonders to outlast glaciers (not to mention the Oslo winters)?

"It was a challenge," Passakas admits, "and we also had to consider things like sharp edges and pointy parts, because at the unveiling kids were climbing all over it. But we like a challenge, and it was good for us to consider questions we had not had to think about as much in the past."

"We wanted a colour that would stand out in the snows of Oslo, that would look striking next to brilliant white, but that was also a Nordic colour." — Radoslaw Kudlinski

As the title of the competition reveals, the sculpture is based on Henrik Ibsen's five-act verse play of the same name, a strange fantasy work itself based on a popular, stranger Norwegian fairy tale – one involving brownies (the elfin kind, not the cookie-selling kind), nixies, "troll-urchins" (a perhaps redundant term), gnomes, fairy kings, dewy dairy maids and a giant worm monster called a Boyg. Ibsen gives good source material.

Combing through the play, Blue Republic discovered that the themes – heroism, pagan versus Christian heritages, and nationalism – were hardly unfamiliar to them as Polish expatriates.

"We read the Ibsen play, studied it first, because that was the theme of the commission," Kudlinski recalls, "but, of course, we already knew some of it, from our own childhoods, and also the nature of the story was not strange to us – it's a very European kind of story, with monsters and mysterious woods. We didn't feel that we were out of place working with this story that Norwegians hold so dear, or that we were in any way appropriating anything."

Nor did the Norwegian judges and Oslo civic authorities, who chose Blue Republic's proposal over more than 200 international submissions. The staggered jury process, boiling the submissions down to six contenders, took over a year to complete.

The result, titled *Where the starting point is crazy minimal, the outcome is often highly original*, is an eerie, 2.1-by-3.4-metre work of public art that does not immediately register as public art. The family-friendly tone that pervades most civic art enterprises is thankfully not present – if anything, the sculpture probably scares small children. The melting, slithering colossus is neither cute (cuteness is the scourge of too many contemporary public art commissions), nor does it mimic

traditional, solemn martial art, the man-on-a-horse school. To be blunt, it's just weird. Wonderfully weird.

Looking more than a little like a half-finished disembowelment frozen in bronze (Smurf blue bronze, granted), the sculpture contains a fiendish, bug-eyed gnome, a satanic, morphing caterpillar monster, and a pair of lizard legs with a giant head stuck on top. Peer Gynt makes an appearance, brandishing a rough stick, but even he appears to be sinking into quicksand, or, perhaps, the burden of his own legacy.

A literal translation of a classic text this sculpture is decidedly not.

"Because it was an international competition, we didn't worry about not being Scandinavian while we were interpreting this very Scandinavian story. We felt it was open to anybody, and so the interpretation was open," Passakas says.

But why blue? And why a cartoonish blue?

"We had the sculpture cast in bronze, but bronze has so many connotations," Kudlinski says, "you know, town square war memorials. So we painted it, but the blue is not a trademark 'Blue Republic blue' – we wanted a colour that would stand out in the snows of Oslo, that would look striking next to brilliant white, but that was also a Nordic colour, because *Peer Gynt* is a very Nordic story, and we are Canadians and share that polar world view with the Norwegians."

"Orange or yellow would not have worked, we needed something like ice, like the climate. Also, the blue looks very nice next to the bright green grass that is all around it in the summer, which we didn't really notice until it was installed."

After such a lengthy process, would they do another large public commission?

"Of course!" Passakas exclaims. "The way we work – we think, we talk, we argue, then we make something – it's the same process, big or small. Our work is very different from this commission, but this was a great pleasure, and we just went wild. But I think with this we learned more about how we work as a team, and that's always good, and, more so, how to work with restrictions."

"It's a departure for us," Kudlinski admits, "a figurative work. But how does that fit in our career? Honestly, I don't care! Ha!"

"And the Norwegians treated us like celebrities," Passakas concludes with a wry grin. "Not something Canadian artists get every day."

*If you are not going to Norway, **Blue Republic** will be showing new work at **Georgia Scherman Projects** in Toronto, from July 8 ([www.georgiascherman.com](http://www.georgiascherman.com)).*