

Monoceros: of the Earth, for the Stars

A meditation on the concretized magyck of FASTWÜRMS

Richard Murray Vaughan

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Monoceros: of the Earth, for the Stars

(a meditation on the
concretized magyck
of FASTWÜRMS)

RM Vaughan

Since 2003, following the recommendations of a multi-levelled, multi-bureaucracy, multi-year study (too many cooks, too many spoons), the city of Toronto has implemented the Percent for Public Art Program – the goal of the program being to compel new private sector buildings to spend a minimum of 1% of their gross construction costs on the commission of new public art.

The results have been predictable: safe, family friendly art for safe, family friendly buildings. Condo art.

But there are always exceptions to every misrule ...

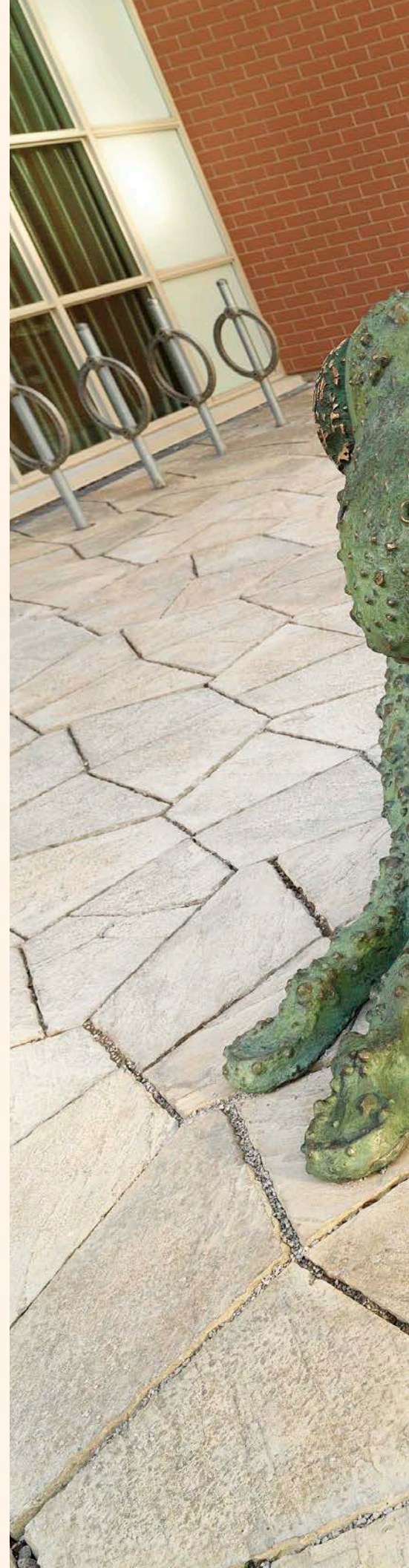
Buried under the snow, the frog is a mound, perhaps a ceremonial mound, one filled with remains and offerings ... or just a child's winter fort. It makes no difference. But only the End of Days will bury the spire, the horn (if then).

A frog and a tusk. A blob and a spire, a stone and a stick. These figures are simple, familiar(s), totemic, they kindle the back of the brain, the reptilian trunk, the knot of nerves where appetites rest, or refuse to rest (it's a mood thing). We might even call this sculpture "charming," because it speaks to children – but we can do so only if we acknowledge that children have no compass for menace (and thus, by the way, make the best converts, soldiers, fanatics). Besides, children will climb on the frog and hug the tusk and yet know nothing of either's lustful, procreative, sex magyck fore-texts. That's fine too – "something for everybody," as they say in public sculpture circles. Of course, public art is such in name only, as the very phrase is oxymoronic. "Meet me at the frog, meet me at the unicorn horn," people will text each other and not know they are casting spells.

Artists who work with primordial forces are often mislabelled "shamanistic" artists, as if their only intent (intent itself being a silly way to talk about art) was to heal, to calm, to make balm from brimstone. What if the art is a counter-gesture, a bold strike against its very surroundings? That is not shamanism, but the very opposite, not a poultice from the medicine man but a lit fuse tossed by a Jacobean.

How I love this work, with all its particles of resistance flaring out for the careful to see and the hapless to miss.

FASTWÜRMS, Monoceros, 2013, Bronze. Photo : avec l'aimable autorisation des artistes/Courtesy the artists.





Just the facts: *Monoceros*; FASTWÜRMS (a collective, comprised of Kim Kozzi and Dai Skuze); 2013, sandcast bronze, crushed rock, cement; commissioned by Plaza (a real estate concern) for The Tower at King West (a rather grandly named but otherwise anonymous glass box condominium complex in the Toronto pre-fab insta-neighbourhood dubbed Liberty Village); comprised of a representation of a frog, approximately 8 feet long and 4 feet high, and a representation of a narwhal tusk/unicorn horn (that's up to you) approximately 37 feet tall resting on an 11-foot "moon disc."

– And, yes, I acknowledge that the above paragraph includes more than mere "facts" –

I detest Liberty Village. Like too many of Toronto's new neighbourhoods, it is not actually a neighbourhood – it is a convenience hub decorated with housing. Liberty Village arrives in the city fully formed, a space unburdened by accident (happy or otherwise), organic growth, or actualized history (there are, to be fair, some "preserved" buildings in the area, but without the plaques you cannot tell the new from the old – so thoroughly have these historical spaces been refurbished, they could easily pass for fakes). The choice of the word "village" as a moniker brings unintended ironies, as the area will remind anyone who was ever taken to a holiday spot by their parents of any number of tourist trap artificial "villages" – *Santa's Village*, *Two Gun Village*, *Dollywood* – spaces designed to distract and amuse while producing nothing of lasting value. Liberty Village is a simulacrum of a village, a Baudrillardian supremacy, a space about "space," a shrugging, vapid notional community made gaspingly, brown-steel-and-blue-glass real.

I had to force myself to see *Monoceros*, because the area this gorgeous work enlivens makes me feel dead inside. And I am not prone to bouts of authenticity-chasing (in fact, that particular craze, the other side of the Baudrillardian coin, is equally annoying to me).

... and yet, I felt ... a stirring.

Worlds collide. Commerce and atavism. The International Condominium Shoebox Style and unflinching, mad idiosyncrasy. Money and magyck.

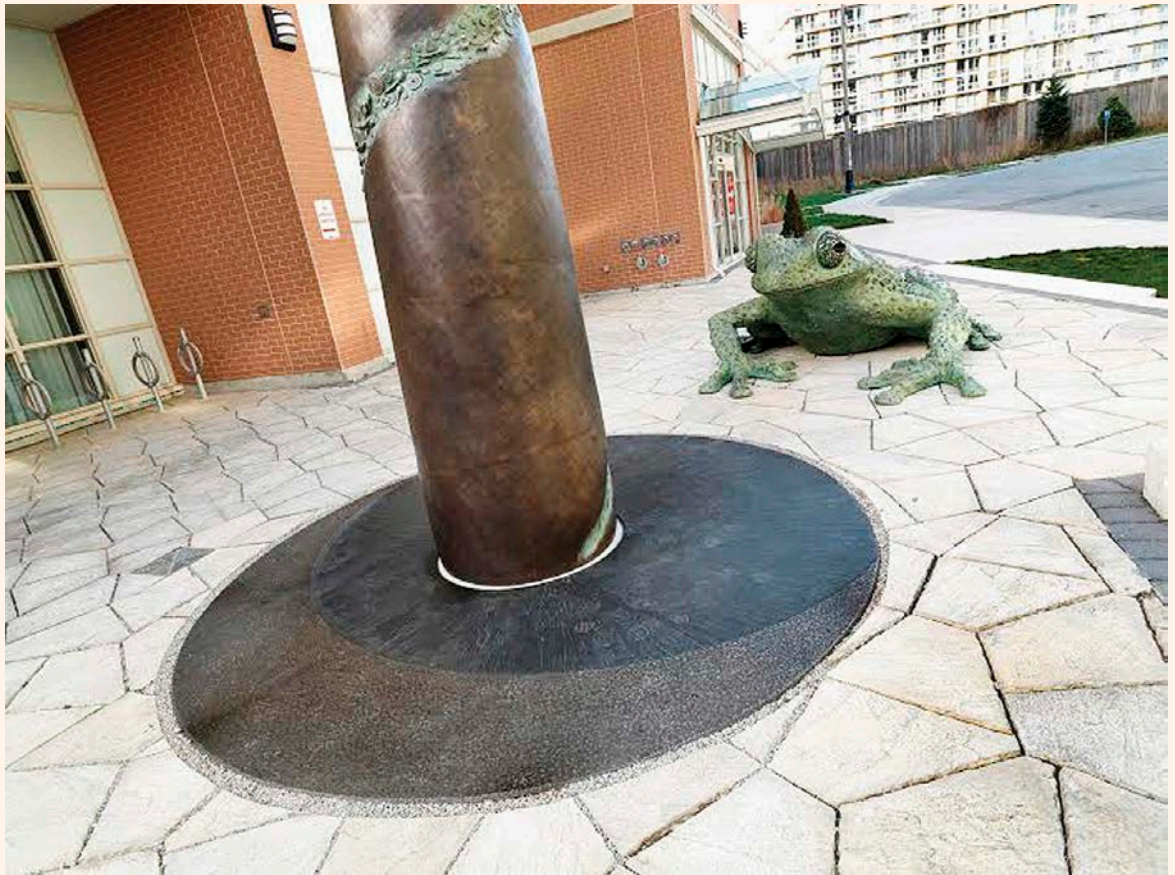
The dynamic at play in *Monoceros* is one I will never tire of – namely, one wherein public art appears to be performing one function (and, therefore, of course, does indeed perform that function) but is primarily performing another function, one often (but not always, and certainly not necessarily) in contradiction of the immediately visible function.

Monoceros is a cheerful work, because giant depictions of tiny animals are inherently cheerful, as are all sculptural references to the ever-popular unicorn, that mainstay of fantasy literature (we will set aside the unicorn's emerging status as an ironic meme denoting failed enthusiasms, the tee shirts that depict unicorns vomiting rainbows, or the masks that allow children to play at being unicorns filled with blood lust). But the very surfaces of the work, its textures, denote another set of actions – those in kind with the creation of an extra-natural space.

The frog is covered in warts, each unique, as if it had been tattooed, painted for war. The back of the frog carries a star map marked with pentacles (the stars form the "Big Dipper" or "Butcher's Cleaver,"

"Seven Gods," "Seven Sages," "Ursa Major" – depends on who you ask). The spire is scarred; deep, greenish grooves form an upward river, a river teeming with amphibian life, a sky-bound waterway peppered with magic coins, amulets and Milagros, votive baubles.

FASTWÜRM, Monoceros, 2013, Sandcast, bronze, crushed rock. Photo : avec l'aimable autorisation des artistes/Courtesy the artists.



So, here, in the middle of an over-determined urban re-settlement, a cluttered vacancy, we are granted an eternal human wish (to step outside ourselves) and returned to our (sixth) senses. The vapours rise and the dishpan-dull glass boxes fog over, the box dwellers hush up. Dogs prick up their ears, cats squint.

The visceral, the blood-vital, pulses off *Monoceros*, and its banal surroundings become, again, spaces attentive to their swampy, twitching roots. This is not a work of “public art” so much as public service.

A city badly in need of white witchcraft is given a megalith and an altar (hey, it’s a good start). A city losing its direction is given a jewel bearing and a needle.

Under the snow, the frog is a cairn, the horn a wick.
