

A Creature Feature and Sculptopolous rock the Voodoo Art Experience

Voodoo has established itself as one of a handful of festivals worldwide that are major destinations for art lovers. People now go for the "Voodoo Experience," where they enjoy world-class performing artists, multimedia art installations, parades, light shows, craft and food booths, and a variety of activities. A surreal playground of sculpture and multimedia exhibits incorporate the natural landscape of New Orleans' City Park and engage festivalgoers. The stellar cast of artists that create these installations has turned heads in the art community, drawing fans like a mini Prospect. This year, curator Stefan Beese of REBE Design and Voodoo Experience founder Stephen Rehage took Voodoo Art to the next level.

"We want to involve young artists and architects and give them a platform to show their work and get involved," Beese says. REBE Design and Rehage Entertainment staged a competition at Tulane University, calling for teams of architectural students to design a pavilion; the winning team got two weeks to erect their design. "Next year, I'd like to go national and do the competition in a broader scope, open it up to more artists. It's a breeding ground for new ideas."

Beese also reached out to local artists and organizations. Local Plan B (a community bike project) and Richie Jordan created a fleur de lis fountain from recycled bike parts that spurted blue tinted water. New Orleans neon artist Jerry Theriot laced the ancient oaks with blinking neon words. Delaney McGuinness and Johnston Burkhardt planted a giant pinwheel garden. During the festival, a team of local and international artists painted a wild live graffiti mural, working by blacklight near the Preservation Hall stage. National and international artists included big names like Doron Gazit, who festooned the trees with huge, colorful balloon lanterns, and Jamin Murphy, who fashioned colorful fabric sculptures that served as awnings as well as transitions from one festival space to the next. Back by popular demand were the Cone v2 and Beese's iconic Voodoo sign and award-winning LOA lounge seating made from recycled shipping containers.

My festival favorites were the dramatic large-scale metal sculptures: Michalopoulos' abstract sculpture garden and the pair of interactive metal bird sculptures made by husband and wife team Christian Ristow and Christina Sporrang. I got a chance to catch up with these artists and find out what inspires them.



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CREATURE FEATURE

Two giant metal birds arch their wings into the sky, their stretching forms echoing each other's silhouettes across the bayou. Much like the artists, husband and wife Christian Ristow and Christina Sporrang, the winged figures play off of each other while expressing their own unique purposes.

The Heron Project has the slow grace of an egret and the fiery drama of a phoenix; its long, graceful neck moves back and forth, while nighttime finds its wings lit on fire, casting a flickering specter on the mirrored surface of the dark pool of water at its back. The element of performance was added at Voodoo when local aerialist troupe the Mystic Ponies staged a series of performances over the course of the weekend. They spun, climbed, twirled, and danced in the air, suspended on long swaths of fabric hung from the tip of the Heron's beak. It created a stunning visual spectacle. Beese arranged the collaboration between New Mexico's Sporrang and the dance troupe, whose rehearsal space is in his and Rehage's office.

Across the water, Fledgeling, Heron's mate, unfurled its great wings as if it was about to take flight into the dusky October sky. Artist Christian Ristow says Fledgeling is one of a number of large kinetic sculptures he's done, but the first time he's ever worked with the avian form. To move the wings, you can climb the tail feathers and sit in the ribcage of the bird, where pedaling a set of bicycle cranks sets in motion an intricate network of gears that gradually lift and unfurl the wings, mimicking the natural motions of a bird. As you pedal, you get a bird's eye (or heart, rather) view of the festival.

Ristow is no stranger to creating larger than life sculptures. "At Burning Man, I did a giant face. Each function had a separate mechanism—one for the eyes blinking, one for the eyebrows, one for the lips to move—so it took a total of 12 people working together to control the entire face," he says. Another piece he did was a giant hydraulic hand, big enough to pick up and crush a car. It was controlled by a single glove controller, wielding an amazing amount of force. His "smaller" work consists of a series of radio-controlled battling robots (about twice the size of a human) that performed mini-battles, destroyed set pieces, and used flamethrowers during staged shows. Ristow's robots performed for years in Los Angeles, where he got into doing special effects for movies.

Ristow and his family live in Taos, New Mexico, where he says there's plenty of space to create. "We help each other with the fabrication of pieces and with engineering, but we've never really collaborated on a project," he pauses, "except a baby!" he adds, laughing.

"I like building big, and I've always had a fascination with anatomy and birds, so it's a natural fit. For years I collected road kill and dead animals. I dreamt about finding a big bird on the road, all throughout the time I was building Fledgeling, but I never did. Then, two weeks after I finished this sculpture, I ran into a golden eagle by accident on the road. Thankfully, he wasn't badly injured. I took him to a wildlife refuge, where he got better and was released into the wild again. It was an amazing experience to hold an eagle...he was docile and so beautiful. I don't think it was a coincidence."

SCULPTOPOLOUS

Sparkie TouT Taux is a sculpture installation created by world-famous Louisiana artist James Michalopoulos. Some are tripods with soaring vertical metal columns bending and twisting to crescendo in explosions of brightly colored unusual geometric forms. Others are based on vibrations and dance moves, creating the illusion of a frenzy of vibrant dancing pipes jumping out from the background of gnarled oak silhouettes at twilight.

"It's the same process as painting. That would explain the diversity of my subject matter. I don't feel really constrained to follow anything more than what is telling the truth. At any point in time that can change," says James Michalopoulos. "My sculptures appear to be naturally inspired. There is a dynamic aspect; they are colorful, they flow and sway, and they are on stems. In essence, they speak to biology and DNA."

"I'm interested in creating something transitory but potent. It's an interesting challenge because things need to be safe, lightweight, and moveable. It's different than what public sculpture is normally created to be—static, immovable, and permanent. I think it fits well into the atmosphere here, and people have been open and appreciative of the experimental quality of it. It has a very young, extemporaneous quality, appropriate to the energy of the artists here. We're taking risks."

Michalopoulos finds the change of pace refreshing. "It's a whole different muscle group. Painting is wonderful, and I'm very engaged so I'm back and forth all day on my feet, and I use knives as well as brushes, so I'm engaging physically. All that being said, when you get into metal, it's a whole other matter all together. You have to cut and lift and fabricate and it's challenging and undeniable. I was afraid of it for a long time; not for any reason but that it was just so foreign to me. Now I've warmed up to it feels like comfortable. I've always liked the 3-D, but it was just a question of getting there. Also, I was interested in creating work that has a permanence to it. How do you make it last?"

Michalopoulos is best known for his paintings of local streets, houses, and scenery. Sculpture, though not his first medium, has come naturally to him; he's dubbed his 3-D work "Sculptopolous." "Honestly, sculpture came along as part of the process. Something strikes me, and I find myself going one way or the other. It's often accidental, and it's auto-instructional. I allow life to guide me; that, and the work itself." ♦



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