

Art is All Around Us - KUHT
Interview with Paul Kittleson

I: Paul, if you could just introduce yourself and ... what you do.

PK: **14:00:27** My name is Paul Kittleson, I'm an artist and also a teacher at the University of Houston.

I: Great. Could you talk about your piece downtown, you say that, say the name of it and where it is.

PK: The piece downtown is called the "Disappearing Gnomes" and it's at the -- One Allen Centre office complex, I guess, downtown. Is it on Smith Street? I think -- yes.

I: Great. Can you tell me a little bit about it came to be?

PK: The gnomes were first featured in the exhibition at Hiram Butler Gallery back in 1992 -- and Hiram Butler has a very nice outdoor sculpture area with plants in it -- and my wife Carter Ernst and I were asked to do some sort of art installation in the garden area -- and so we came up with the idea of a -- sort of a fanciful garden -- it's titled "Garden of Earthly Delights" -- and she made a variety of plants and flowers using pantyhose and neckties -- and things like that and I did a series of concrete pieces that were sort of loosely based on -- on concrete garden gnomes and frogs things that you might see in a garden area. **01:55**

I: You can say that last line over again if you want.

PK: Yeah -- that were based on lawn ornaments of sorts -- the kinds you see alongside of the road with all the different types of animals in concrete -- pieces in front of them. Having -- been growing up in the Midwest it's very common to see deer in the yards and gnomes and little turtles and all those little kitschy kind of things that you see in people's yards was sort of the idea we were playing with -- but wanted to do it on a different sort of level that -- make them a little bit less familiar -- more mysterious -- so -- the Gnomes, although they appear to be a -- your standard sort of garden gnome -- they were reproduced and appear to be disappearing down into the ground as they go -- so, not only are they a kind of familiar garden ornament, they also become sort of a strange artistic sort of thing that happens with the landscape and with the way the landscape consumed the objects and -- in -- in a -- some way --

I: What do you mean? Can you explain that.

PK: Well, I was also thinking about other types of art that had been done out in the environment. **03:26** Things like even Stonehenge or Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* or the *Spiral Jetty* of Robert Smithson -- pieces that are there and have been there for many, many years and -- how, over time -- like the *Spiral Jetty* disappeared beneath the ocean in Salt Lake -- consume those and other ruins that nature has taken over so the -- these -- these sort of contemporary version of that idea is where the gnomes are starting to emerge back up from the ground -- coming out of the environment.

I: What kind of reactions have you gotten to the *Gnomes*?

PK: Well, most people I think feel like that the *Gnomes* are sort of comic relief for their day -- especially the people that work around the Allen Center, which is your typical corporate sort of office space and -- and so I think people see -- as sort of a release from their -- from their day -- something that sparks their imagination, gets them thinking about things other than their ... often sterile work environment so it's a little bit of comic relief going on.

I: How did they end up there? How did they end up in Hiram's gardener ...?

PK: **04:59** I can't remember the person now that worked at Allen Center but they had a fairly active art program going on there during the 90's where they would put up exhibitions in -- in the Allen Center and so -- one of the women that was instrumental in putting on those exhibitions had seen them at the Gallery and felt that it would be a good place to have them -- at Allen Center so they ended up purchasing them from -- from Hiram Butler. And it was very -- it ended up being a very great environment for them because that -- that contrast between their setting and the piece itself is -- seems to work quite well in Allen Center.

I: Do you, for somebody who's never seen the *Disappearing Gnomes*, can you describe them?

PK: Yeah. The *Gnomes* are -- consist of seven sculptures that start -- you -- from the first one you see only the very top of his little hat, and then you see a little bit more of his head and then it works its way down -- so, in increments of seven, they emerge from the ground as they march forward. **06:08** It was also -- they were -- in reference to how the piece was made is that -- they were cast in a mold and so, even though they appear to be buried under the ground they are actually -- just the fact that I filled the mold up a little further each time I poured it and so -- they are not -- the entire sculpture is not below ground, it's just that they are poured in increments. So even though they appear to be buried they are actually just in segments going down into the ground.

I: So what you see is what you get.

PK: Uh-hunh (affirmative). Yep. Yeah. And it's about multiples, making more than one out of the same mold. **06:52**

I: I know you've kind of answered this question already, but I wanted to get it separate from your other answer. What was the inspiration for the Disappearing Gnomes?

PK: Well, like I'd said earlier, but you cut that part out, (laughing) -- well I, having grown up in a middle class sort of suburban environment that -- those types of kitschy objects are so common -- and that sort of thing -- and so I have a strong personal connection to that -- that type of work that's out there. And so I really wanted to sort of make reference to -- to the suburban sort of landscape and environment but do it in a different sort of way -- some -- a way that would make people think something new about -- about garden ornaments as opposed to what we all think of and easily forget about when we see them, so.

I: What did you want people to think when they -- when they look at the Gnomes? What do you hope they experience?

PK: **08:11** I hope people just stop and think about them in whatever direction it might take them, whether it's the Snow White's Seven Dwarfs going off to work in the morning or whether it's a mystery as to whether those things are actually buried down under the ground. Or it's about conformity and kind of falling into the system marching along or -- there's a lot of different directions that I hope people go with it, depending upon where they come from or if they have a Midwestern background like myself and they might relate it to their own personal experiences and things like that, so --

I: Any funny stories related to the Gnomes?

PK: **08:59** Well, shortly after the Gnomes were installed at One Allen Center I got a call that someone had tried to steal one of them and so -- they actually did succeed in taking one of the one -- early ones there and we went to great lengths to secure them down, and then yet they tried to steal yet another one. So we had a bit of a disappearing Gnome thing going on for a while where we had to replace them and secure them down stronger than before, but apparently they've been there okay now for several years, so --

I: Did you ever find them?

PK: No, never did. I don't know who it was, a disgruntled employee or a more likely just some partiers out for a good time trying to get a little memento from Houston, maybe, I don't know.

I: A little Gnome action.

PK: No Gnome action.

I: Tell me, why do think public art is important, Paul?

PK: **10:04** Well, I think art is important in every parts of our lives. It's not only in galleries and museums and in our homes but as well as out in the environment. It's -- it's been a part of every culture and every city throughout time. And so it only makes sense to can -- have art in -- in the modern environment that's out there. It -- it works in so many different ways. It brings identity to certain places, you know, whether, we know of -- whether DeBuffet's sculpture downtown or Henry Moran -- Allen Parkway, or where it is -- but it's a way of kind of marking and giving identity to certain places. It can be something that brings color and just design interest to areas too, with colorful murals and things like that. It can also be a real source of pride in neighborhoods where they have a work of public art that is part of their -- their own neighborhood or community. So it can function in so many different ways, but it's really about who we are as a culture and as a people, and reflecting that through -- through the art work that we have around us -- that Houston's about the things that are in our community here, so. It's very important.

I: Why is it that you mention Houston. Why is it important specifically to Houston?

PK: **11:48** Well, Houston is such a young city. In Europe and older cities art has been there from the beginning, on the buildings and in the plazas and all those things. And, Houston -- I mean, it's only, you know 40 years old -- 50 years old in terms of it really being a contemporary city. A lot of the contemporary architecture is lacking in the art in terms of ornamental sort of design. I think modernist structures were not built with ornament in mind, it was more about architecture and structure and steel and glass and, and a lot of that, so, the traditional role of art as ornamentation for buildings didn't really apply in contemporary cities. But there are -- works like the Miro downtown that have that monumental scale and can stand separate from the building and it's not subservient to the building, it becomes it's own statement in a lot of ways, so art stands on its own in modern -- in a modern context like Houston. It's not -- it doesn't necessarily have to become just a part of the building but it can be -- it can become its own thing.

I: Anything, else, Paul that you want to say about the Gnomes that I might not have asked you? Any questions, any funny ... that might be interesting?

PK: I wish I could. I wish I could spend more time around them and see what sort of things go on with them and how people react to them. In making art you often don't know where it's going to end up in the end or necessarily how people will react to it, so the Gnomes have been a very -- it's been very gratifying to see how well received they've been. How they seem to kind of brighten people's day when they see them in -- going by. **14:14:02** The fact that they are not easily seen from the street, you have to kind of go back into the courtyard, means that people have to go and seek them out and find them in a way, so it's kind of nice that people have to go and look for the art and not have it thrown in their face in some way.

I: I think we hit everything. Any challenges at all, in making the Gnomes?

PK: Other than molds breaking open and things like that, no, they were fairly simple to make. I think a lot of my figurative work -- I think -- I like to think in terms of self portraiture, so the large noses and Nordic sort of features I think have some autobiographical reference there.

I: So you are the model for the Gnomes?

PK: (Laughing). Yes, I'm the model for the Gnome. (Laughing). I am the Gnome.
(Laughing).

?: Are you disappearing?

PK: (Laughing). I will be very shortly.

I: Now that you say it, really --

PK: (Laughing).

I: Terrific. Thanks so much, Paul.

PK: Okay. Good.

?: One in the offices that surround your, your artwork and why do you think, what happens in your offices do you know? My guess, it makes it important for your Gnomes to be there, right?

PK: I have a -- I really have no idea what goes in those offices. You know, having been an artist all my life I'm not real familiar with what happens in the corporate environment. **15:49** Coming from the outside they seem to be somewhat intimidating spaces with their stone walls and polished floors and very little disorder going on. So it seems like a very sort of conformist environment where people need to dress a certain way and not make too many messes -- things that are rather foreign to me. So, I guess that foreign the -- foreign quality of the Gnomes seems to go well there because it is so strange and absurd to have that sort of thing happening in that type of space. Yes.

?: Is there a subversive quality to the Gnomes?

PK: (Laughing).

?: Are you their, a nature of, the difference in the public art, you are talking about the Moreau and how it's statuesque in the middle of the whatever, I mean is it, public art as an educator, you probably see students aspiring to do things --

PK: Uh-hunh (affirmative).

?: -- maybe have a piece one day out there in the open that's ... pratfall there, in terms of putting your work out and having it last for years and years.

PK: Yeah. **17:14** I guess, art always has a certain subversive quality to it. Subversive in the fact that it makes us think about things in different ways. It's about breaking traditions and breaking expectations and those sorts of things so -- in that sense I think the Gnomes --was intentionally supposed to break some expectations and to challenge people's preconceptions about art. And certainly garden gnomes aren't real art, you know they are not some Michelangelo's *David* or anything serious like that -- so it kind of makes them question a little bit about what is art and what isn't art. And you know what is a gnome and where does it come from and all those different things. The gnomes are this mythological character so, in some ways are sort of, you know -- are -- relate to long histories of mythology throughout time. So, they are just contemporary mythology. So. Well.

I: Any reaction, I'm sorry were you going to say something?

PK: No, go ahead.

I: Any reactions that made you laugh, and things you know, any funny --

PK: No. Other than the fact when they started disappearing I did think it was rather humorous that people were -- wanted them bad enough to really try and dig them out of the ground, which I thought was rather humorous -- about it -- and then installing them too, we had to take them up through the loading dock and pushing these funny looking gnomes around on carts was rather kind of funny. **18:52**

?: And were they supposed to look like penises from behind?

PK: (Laughing). No, that never occurred to me. I'm sorry. Seen, in the eye of the beholder though.

Everyone: (Laughing).

?: I am the simplifier for the --

PK: That's right. Uh-hunh (affirmative).

Art is All Around Us - KUHT
Interview with Paul Kittleson
Page 7

[End of Tape 14]