

Right Out In The Middle Of Everyday Life

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When Jim got the call from Connecticut, he was “dumbfounded,” “shocked.” “Sculptures don’t disappear,” he said. At least, not sculptures made of painted wood, with barely any resale value on materials. But his had. “Corbu Bench,” Jim Osman’s latest piece in the Madison Sculpture Mile, a contemporary outdoor public sculpture exhibition, was gone – broken to pieces, he would later learn.

Up to this point, much of the interaction Osman had witnessed between “Corbu Bench” and the residents of Madison, Conn., the small shoreline town where the Sculpture Mile stands, had been largely positive. As Osman intended when he built the interactive sculpture, passersby were sitting on it, reclining on its staggered structure, petting its Astroturf surface; becoming “giddy,” the artist said.

“I think it was the grass on the bench – it just blew people’s minds. I heard people gasp when they would get on it,” Osman said. “It was a nice experience for me to see people have a just a total, visceral reaction.” “Corbu Bench” is an interactive piece: a sloped bench, covered in Astroturf, with raised portions that call to mind a stepping stair and a chair. It is based on the architecture of Le Corbusier, specifically the bathroom at Villa Savoye.

It was on site only briefly before it was taken and dismantled. A sign identifying the piece by title and artist had yet to be added. The apparent art crime garnered substantial attention; an *AP* report was reprinted by several major publications. While some details about the dismantling remain murky, we know that a maintenance worker – believing the piece did not belong there, and unaware that it was a valuable artwork – took a hammer to “Corbu Bench” and left its pieces in a dumpster.

The maintenance worker is employed by the Ciminelli Real Estate Corporation, which did not respond to questions or requests for comment. According to Sculpture Mile organizers, when contacted, the worker and his boss set about relocating the pieces and fronted some of the cost of its repair. “Corbu Bench” was subsequently re-installed by the artist, at a new location in town.



I sat down with Osman to talk through his reaction to the dismantling, and to learn how a public artist conceptualizes or copes with this kind of destructive interaction between his or her art and the public. Speaking with me in his studio roughly a week before the piece was recovered, Osman explained that his initial reaction was, unsurprisingly, disappointment. “I was a little bummed out for a while,” Osman remembered. “It’s just very disappointing because I felt I made one of those pieces that people really like, on a very honest response level.”

“Corbu Bench” is not Osman’s first piece of public art, nor his first to borrow from furniture motifs, but it is expressly interactive in a way his other works haven’t been. He had shown the sculpture previously at the Bushwick Open Studios, where it found an enthusiastic audience, he said.

Osman repeatedly used the words “absurd,” “weird,” and “odd” to describe the dismantling, ultimately processing it as one of life’s quirks to accept and move forward from. “If this got me down, really, I would really have to give it all up,” he said. “It’s just weird – that’s how life works, you know? It’s almost laughable.” Emphasis on the almost. Then came the question of whether to repair, rebuild or abandon.

By Osman's description, this question was in part one of practicality. The sculpture was built to sustain hundreds of pounds of body weight, with a skeleton of complicated truss work, as well as 50 screws and more than 100 nails, not to mention glue. "I went through a couple versions, like, 'forget it, I don't want to deal with it, I'm done,' [to] maybe I can fix it," he explained.

Ideally, he said, he would rather spend a day or two fixing "Corbu Bench" than the rest of his summer building a new one. But aside from the grunt work of putting the sculpture back together, Osman noted that repairing it could have some psychological value.

"I like to wrap things up. I like to have a finish," he said. "I would like to end this episode by fixing it. That would be the positive thing for me."



Although "Corbu Bench's" dismantling was a singular event and shocking to those involved, it was one of many "very odd situations" at the Sculpture Mile, in the words of William Bendig, President/Curator of the Mile's sponsor, the Hollycroft Foundation.

There was Jean-Paul Jacquet's "Plane," a larger-than-life sculpture mimicking a paper airplane, which was stolen and never recovered. There was the marble nude recovered in the town dump, described here by the *Hartford Courant* among several other instances of vandalism. Then there is the more predictable community angst, exemplified by the reaction to Philip Grausman's

“Victoria,” which was criticized by many for its perceived penis qualities. For Bendig, theft, destruction and opposition are an outdoor public art exhibit’s cross to bear. “A museum garden – it’s psychologically more protected. We’re right out in the middle of everyday life,” he explained.

Sitting with Bendig at the Sculpture Mile, in the shade next to a Stop and Shop parking lot, we were surrounded by art: two tall, abstract pieces installed at the edge of the lot; Osman’s recovered work and others on a patch of grass next to the store entrance; a handful of works leading up to and lining a pathway to Madison’s Main Street; and a small geometric sculpture, unhitched from its base, which Bendig believes was knocked off on purpose.

In the grand scheme of Sculpture Mile vandalism, Osman appears to have lucked out. As he had hoped, he was ultimately able to piece his sculpture back together. When I visited, “Corbu Bench” appeared fully intact and stable, with nothing to indicate that it had recently been fished out of a dumpster.

Whereas Osman displayed a mostly Zen attitude about the dismantling, Bendig, who has organized the Sculpture Mile for more than a decade, spoke with frustration. “The least understood of all the arts is sculpture. I don’t think there’s any question about that,” he said. “We’ve had a number of very odd situations which basically comes from ignorance... it’s just one of those things you have to put up with.”

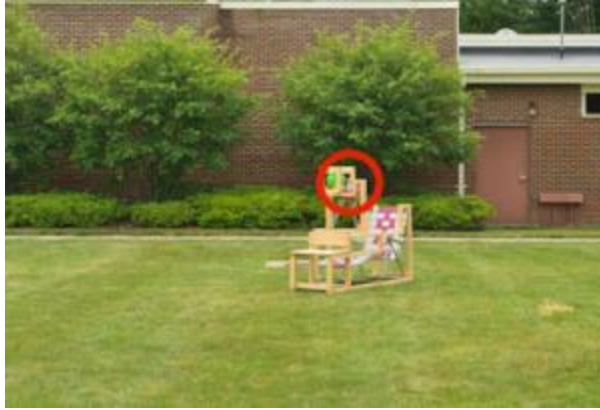
So what keeps Bendig pushing the boulder up the hill? The artists, he said, and the kids. Exhibition opportunities for contemporary sculptors are hard to come by, per Bendig’s explanation. The already tightly sealed world of contemporary gallerists and museum curators is especially hard for them to penetrate, due in part to the size and maintenance often required by their works. Therefore one of the Sculpture Mile’s “basic missions” is to “encourage contemporary sculptors.”

Meanwhile, he noted, “young people who will see this exhibition will remember it the rest of their lives,” which I can confirm based on my own memory, and after speaking with some of my hometown friends in the process of writing this article.

“It’s interesting how positive the kids have been about it,” Bendig continued. “Kids accept it – they’re very interested.” And besides, there are rewards.

The Hollycroft Foundation has loyal, local supporters – including renowned chef and Madisonite Jacques Pepin, apparently – has attracted a long list of accomplished sculptors, and has even inspired cases of mysterious but positive interaction with its audience. Both Osman and Bendig remembered a bright pink bottle of soap bubbles, placed anonymously, but purposefully, on an earlier Sculpture Mile piece of Osman’s.

“Someone really interacted with the piece in a subtle, positive, fun way,” Osman said. “I went, ‘someone gets it,’ and I left it there.”



Osman left the bubble bottle on the sculpture. Image courtesy of the artist.

During my initial conversation with Osman, the artist noted that if he was able to rebuild the piece, he wanted to install it in a new site. The courtyard walkway where it originally sat has “obviously a bad vibe,” he said. Relocating would be a chance to “start fresh.”

From its original position in the Sculpture Mile, “Corbu Bench” was not at all isolated. Other sculptures of various sizes line this walkway, an important byway off of Main Street. Osman’s piece, however, was at the center of the courtyard, in clear view from all directions – “right out in the middle,” as Bendig might say.

Now, from its spot next to the supermarket, it is more removed but not necessarily safer; just a few feet away, two bronze statues were stolen in 2013.

“At first there was relief,” Osman said in an email a few days ago, after I asked about the rebuilding process. “I am very happy I could rebuild the piece, and that it’s in the community.”

“Hopefully,” he added, “being sat on an enjoyed.”