

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Mark Grotjahn's snowmen hit the slopes in Aspen



Hard-core snowboarders and skiers in Aspen, Colo., might get surly when it rains, but Mark Grotjahn's newest sculptures, which are sharing their slopes, seem content in any weather. They are boxy, cheery, colorfully painted bronze heads with cut-out eyes that look like they were based on cardboard sculptures made by a kid. In fact, they were based on cardboard sculptures made by an acclaimed L.A. artist.

Grotjahn first showed his primitive cardboard sculptures in a group show, "Painting in Tongues," at L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art in 2006. Now his painted bronze versions have made their debut in Colorado: Snowmass, Aspen Mountain, Aspen Highlands and Buttermilk each feature one sculpture, with the fifth located nearby at the Aspen Art Museum, where a survey of Grotjahn's work opened Monday.

"I think it's great," said Grotjahn, 43, who grew up in the Bay Area skiing Squaw Valley before he freestyled his way through the University of Colorado in Boulder. "I love the idea of snow on

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their noses. I want my work to be around snow, I always want to be around snow personally. Snow makes me happy."

He says he's particularly excited about the placement of the sculpture with the biggest nose, originally the tube from a paper towel roll, at an Austrian restaurant that used to be a ski patrol house. "My work is out on the porch, so people can have their walnut liqueur while looking at the mask," says Grotjahn. "The other sculptures are planted on the slopes in spots meant to be visible to any decent skier."

Along with making this outdoor artwork, Grotjahn has designed a set of five lift tickets for the Aspen Skiing Co. featuring images of these sculptures. The idea for both projects came from Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, director of the Aspen Art Museum and the curator of Grotjahn's solo show.

She has been persuading artists to rethink lift tickets for the company since she arrived at the museum in 2005. "I noticed that people had these lift tickets hanging off jackets, [with images of] generic alpine landscape, and thought it was a waste," she explained. "I thought it would be a perfect canvas for commissioning artists' projects. It just seemed like a no-brainer."

In the past she has worked on lift tickets with such artists as Jim Hodges, Karen Kilimnik and Peter Doig. Hodges did a colorful ticket for the 2008-09 season that says "Give more than you take," while Kilimnik and Doig each did tickets featuring snowy paintings.

Typically the collaboration stems from a show scheduled at the Aspen Art Museum. Often it involves some sort of brainstorming session on skis. In Grotjahn's case, Zuckerman Jacobson, Aspen Skiing Co. CEO Mike Kaplan and the artist hit the slopes together in the early stages of discussing her show. Only Zuckerman Jacobson didn't last long: "On the first run that day, I fell and tore my ACL and meniscus. That's the easiest way to lose your one-person museum exhibition," she said, laughing.

But the show has gone on, and she has helped to produce a book, just out, "Art in Unexpected Places: The Aspen Art Museum/Aspen Skiing Company Collaboration," which documents the projects to date. She also just completed the catalog for Grotjahn's exhibition, which focuses on his well-known "butterfly" and "face" paintings.

As for the new sculpture, Grotjahn says his bronzes will make their gallery debut in September at Gagolian Gallery in New York. But this time the powder connoisseurs get the first look.

Does Grotjahn have any fear about the sculptures' ability to weather the elements? "They are bronze but they are painted with oil. So I think there is a good possibility they will get damaged. But that's OK," he added. "This is about having fun."

-Jori Finkel

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