

FREE THE GALAZAN FIVE!

June 13-July 27, 2008

Opening reception: June 13, 6-9 pm

Controversies over public art are not a new phenomenon. Because 'the public' is composed of so many different and often competing constituencies, it only follows that anything made for the public should meet with controversy. The 1981 dust-up over a group of sculptures then-Milwaukee artist Gene Galazan made as a city-sponsored public art project under the federally funded CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) program, echoes similar problems confronting Milwaukee today.

At the time, the Richard Serra *Tilted Arc* controversy was simmering in New York, only to be resolved with the destruction of the work in 1989. The case of the Galazan Five, a group of smaller and less obtrusive Cor-Ten steel sculptures intended to be placed in a public setting like a park, is not so clear-cut. As with *Tilted Arc*, the contract was signed, the artist completed the work, and the public funds were spent. But the Galazan pieces were never installed. According to the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Anthony S. Busalacchi, president of the Milwaukee Art Commission, cited two reasons for the pre-emptive decision to keep the sculptures from public space: they were too "boldly abstract" and their sharp edges and corners might be dangerous to children.¹ Locked away in storage, the pieces were not allowed to generate a public response, whether positive or negative.

Unlike Serra's *Tilted Arc*, Galazan's work was not designed for a specific site; indeed, in the artist's judgment, moving the sculptures to a "safe" site would have been an acceptable alternative. For Serra, *Tilted Arc* was destroyed when it was moved from its site; its brutal blow-torch dismantling was only a coda to this destruction. Thankfully, Galazan's pieces never faced such a straightforwardly dire fate. Instead, they suffered neglect and loss of purpose as competing definitions of the public good denied the people the right to take possession of "their" artwork. The number of people who have experienced the Galazan sculptures directly is much smaller than it should have been.

After the pieces languished in a city warehouse for two years, Galazan instituted a small protest at City Hall, marching with a group of friends and supporters to gently demand that the five sculptures be "freed" from their imprisonment. Galazan's light touch and sense of humor is evident in the group's chant for the occasion, "Free the Galazan Five!"²

Word of the protest reached then-*Milwaukee Sentinel* art critic Dean Jensen (now a prominent art dealer), who published a story with a photograph by Mary Jones two days prior to Galazan's action. The protest was at least a partial success, as the sculptures were eventually released, and found their way first to the small, public (but relatively out-of-the-way) sculpture park at Emmer Foods in the Menomonee Valley. This was long before the area was redeveloped to include the much-trafficked Potawatomi Casino or the Hank Aaron trail, an area designed to accommodate public art. Eventually, Wisconsin art historian and collector Gary John Gresl negotiated possession of the sculptures and relocated them to his small north Milwaukee suburban estate, where they remain to this day.

This exhibition aims, in part, to restore to the sculptures a public, a fitting gesture for Inova's new off-campus gallery space. Though the works will not be sited permanently, nor set in a conventional public space like a park or the Riverwalk or the airport, the sculptures will at least see some portion of the light of day and receive some of the public scrutiny that they deserve. They are being presented with documentary materials that place them in their local historical context.

Many thanks are given for help in making this exhibition possible: first, to Gene Galazan, who now resides in Arizona, for being game enough to revisit this long-ago chapter of his artistic history; to Gary John Gresl, for graciously lending the sculptures; to Dean Johnson, a friend of Galazan's and restless photographer, for providing contemporaneous documentary photos of Galazan and his milieu; to UWM art history graduate student Neil Gasparika for research assistance; to Tom Bamberger and Bruce Brockman for their printing services; to Sarah Johnson of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* photo archive, who put me on the trail of the original Jensen article; and to the Milwaukee Public Library for allowing access to a copy of it.

In light of recent and current controversies complicating public art in Milwaukee, including the argument over moving the Mark DiSuvero sculpture *The Calling* away from the Calatrava addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum,³ County Executive Scott Walker's fiasco with the Dennis Oppenheim "blue shirt" sculpture, and the "Bronze Fonz" foofaraw,⁴ may it be of some small comfort to these generally well-intentioned artists that they have plenty of company and that the ranks of the aggrieved will only swell.

— Nicholas Frank, Curator



Notes

1. Dean Jensen, "Sculptor hopes protest will free 'hostage' work," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Tuesday, March 2, 1982, sec. 1, p. 5. This article refers to nine sculptures, but four of them were unrelated to the group of five in the exhibition.

2. The chant was probably a politically conscious but playful reference to the trial of the Chicago Seven of a decade earlier.

3. James Auer, "Readers' verdict clear: 'Move di Suvero now,'" *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, October 24, 2001, <http://www2.jsonline.com/onwisconsin/arts/oct01/suvero25102401.asp>.

4. Mary Louise Schumacher, "Fonzie hubbub a monument to public art without a plan," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, December 8, 2007, <http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=694071>.

About the Artist

Gene Galazan has been working as an artist for over 40 years. He received his MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1966; during his student years, he titled all of his work "Get Out of Vietnam" and risked losing the award accompanying his top prize in the 1966 Milwaukee Art Museum Biennial exhibition when he refused to change the title. Galazan's first solo exhibition was at the Esther Robles Gallery in Los Angeles; he then worked as a CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) artist for the City of Milwaukee. In 1995, Galazan moved to Arizona where he is currently working on scrap steel and steel beam totems and rehearsing a performance work entitled "Ravings of a Mad Jewish Man." His work is in the collection of the Phippen Museum in Prescott, Arizona.

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Gallery hours: Wednesday-Sunday,
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