

NEW YORK OBSERVER

NOVEMBER 17, 2003

Otterness Gnomes to Invade Upper West Side

Since 1992, an army of gnomes has been steadily invading Manhattan and slowly but surely expanding its empire across the city, often going unnoticed by an unsuspecting public.



The fanciful little men, it turns out, are brothers from an entire family of bronze, cartoon-like creatures: construction workers that crawl out of a penny shaped like a manhole in the Eighth Avenue and 14th Street subway; a cornucopia of money-obsessed gremlins living in Battery Park City; and various characters that find shelter in the Times Square Hilton and the Children's Hospital at Montefiore in the Bronx, among other locales.

The gnomes are the brainchildren of the internationally renowned New York City sculptor, Tom Otterness. And with a nod from Community Board 7 at its Nov. 5 meeting, the city should soon be seeing an explosion of the artist's work on the Upper West Side.

Bob Herrmann, co-chair of the board's parks committee and president of the Broadway Mall Association, began talks with Mr. Otterness about the public project over two years ago. With the board's ebullient blessing (Mr. Herrmann's co-chair, Barbara Adler, gushingly called the artist "an amazing world-class sculptor"), the Parks Department intends to issue permits for an installation of 20 to 30 of Mr. Otterness' trademark sculptures along the malls on Broadway, running between West

60th and West 168th streets. (The Parks Department must also seek approval from Boards 9 and 12 for the space above 110th Street, where Board 7's district ends, before the work is installed next autumn.) As is the custom,



Wedding on the mall: Tom Otterness' *Marriage of Real Estate and Money* is one of the many bronze statues that will comprise his forthcoming installation along Broadway between 60th and 168th streets.

the city will pay nothing for the installation; Mr. Otterness and his Marlborough Gallery will assume all the costs.

"It's a great opportunity," Mr. Otterness said of the installation. "I think it's especially good that it goes so far north. You seldom see this kind of public sculpture going that far north

anywhere in the city. So that's exciting: Broadway cuts through so many different communities."

While Mr. Otterness and his 20 full-time assistants have yet to construct some of the pieces in their DUMBO studio, most of the planned works already exist. A sister installation (consisting of duplicates of many of the pieces) will spend next summer on public display in Scheveningen, the Netherlands.

The artist, who told *The Observer* that someone once described his 1920's-animation-inspired work as "Disney on acid," said that it is, in fact, New York City itself—where he's made his home for the last 30 years—that has inspired the characters and themes he portrays. Included in his *oeuvre* are portrayals of the financial rat race (top-hat-wearing capitalists, subway workers), as well as images inspired by Lincoln Center productions, such as *Moby Dick* swallowing a tin soldier and a ballerina, and the *Frog Prince*. The Broadway installation will feature a giant bear, a stick figure standing on a very tall leg, and little creatures wandering around the perimeter of a penny (money makes the world go 'round).

When contacted by *The Observer*, Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe said, "We have been fans of Otterness' work for years." He added that "we hope it will be a good point of entry for further large-scale art exhibitions on the Broadway malls, similar to what's been done on the Park Avenue malls"—referring to Robert Indiana's *One Through Zero* and other works that have adorned the Upper East Side.

Jon Kessler, chair of the visual-arts division of Columbia's School of the Arts, told *The Observer* that "Tom is probably the most successful public sculptor of our generation.... The reason for that is because the work functions on so many different levels." He paid tribute to Mr. Otterness' ability to pass a Marxist message on to the masses. "He does it in such a playful, accessible way. So it appeals to children, it appeals to the everyman," he said.

—Benjamin Ryan