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LEFT Tom Otterness with a clay work in progress for *Immigrant Family*, 2006.
ABOVE *See No Evil*, 2002, installed in Indianapolis.
BELOW *Figures from Life Underground*, 2004, at the 14th Street and 8th Avenue subway station in Manhattan.





ABOVE *Macy's Parade Humpty Dumpty* by Tom Otterness, 2005.

RIGHT *Hay-Makin-Hay*, 2002, towers over a field in Utica, Montana.

LOWER RIGHT An early work, *Death Figure*, 1990, stands 17½ inches tall.

BELOW *Big, Big Penny*, 1993, was on view in New York last year as part of the "Tom Otterness on Broadway" installation.



Creeping Cats & Fish in Hats

Whether ankle-high or giant-size,

Tom Otterness's roly-poly figures are whimsical, fantastical, and not as innocent as they may seem

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

"SEX, CLASS, MONEY, RACE— these are things that we just don't talk about much and that I try to find a way to put into public sculpture," says Tom Otterness. "At best the public work initiates some conversation about one of those subjects among people who normally wouldn't be talking to each other."

If such themes ripple through Otterness's installations of bronze sculptures inhabiting 22 parks, plazas, courthouses, and other well-traversed venues worldwide, they do so in a non-confrontational manner. Humorous and playful, his signature cartoonish figures—fish wearing top hats, couples dancing on money bags, figures gleefully pushing one another from buildings—stop people in their tracks. Often alluding to fairy tales and political cartoons, Otterness's work is imbued with multiple meanings and a kind of subterfuge. "The lovability of the figures is the way into the work for the public," says the 53-year-old New York-based artist, who grew up in Wichita, Kansas. "But if they want to go any further with it, then there's something else in there."

This populist impulse is what led Otterness to create a balloon for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade last year, the first time an art-world figure had ever contributed to the event. The impetus came from Robin Hall, executive producer of the parade, who lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and had admired sculptures in the "Tom Otterness on Broadway" installation early last year. While most artists might not aspire to such a showcase, Otterness leapt at the chance. Taking advantage of his new medium's buoyancy, he made a giant Humpty Dumpty suspended in an upside-down tumble, as though he might have jumped from one of the swanky Central Park West rooftops, he explains.

"I see the Macy's parade as an American contemporary folk-art parade," says Otterness, who grew up watching it on television every year. "It's a combination of what kids like and what we can market, and the whole thing says something about our culture. I loved having a work seen in that context." Weren't most viewers probably unaware that they were experiencing public art? "Even better," he says with a laugh. "It's like a Trojan horse that gets carried with the parade into 50 million homes."

Otterness has previously shown his work in an even more unexpected venue than the Macy's parade. Long inspired by outsider art and folk art, he has traveled the country visiting quirky art sites like S. P. Dinsmoor's cabin home, *Garden of Eden* (1907), in Lucas, Kansas. After hearing about an annual competition in a Utica, Montana, farming community for the best hay-bale sculpture, Otterness nosed around and talked his way into the show. A week after harvest in 2002, he unveiled three figures similar to his typical roly-poly forms but fabricated from cylindrical bales of hay. Up to 18 feet tall, the figures—busy harvesting, rolling, or carrying hay—towered over the flat golden field. On opening day, 5,000 cars arrived from as far away as Canada. Each carload voted for its favorite sculpture, but Otterness recused himself from contention for the \$100 prize because he had a much bigger budget than the other participants. "They told me I would have won, but very narrowly!" he howls in amusement.

With striking white shoulder-length hair and an intent gaze behind his glasses, Otterness is as affable and open as his art. His sprawling Brooklyn studio is something of a Santa's workshop, teeming with assistants—anywhere from 10 to 20 at a time—and projects at various stages of completion, but Otterness remains, at the center of it all, down to earth and true to his Midwestern roots. His father, who worked in management at Boeing, was also a poet, and his mother was a waitress. They were always supportive of Otterness and his sisters' making art. For him, that was mostly painting and drawing, but he remembers finding some clay at the bottom of a creek and sitting in the water making little heads.

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WHEN OTTERNESS WAS 13, he joined his childhood friend David Salle in classes at the Wichita Art Association. They studied with well-known regional painters William and Betty Dickerson, who "knew about Hopper and what 'real' art was," says Otterness. In high school, Otterness won a Scholastic Art Award and, through that, received a scholarship to attend the Art Students League in New York. At 18, he moved to the city, studying anatomy by day and abstract painting at night.

A couple of years later, he joined the Whitney Museum of

Hilarie M. Sheets is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

The first artist to create a balloon for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, he made a giant Humpty Dumpty suspended in an upside-down tumble

American Art's independent study program, from which he graduated in 1973. There he explored conceptual photography and video and met his wife, Colleen Fitzgibbon, as well as other artists with whom he founded Collaborative Projects Inc. (CoLab) in 1977. "A lot of us were looking for a place to show, and there was no avenue to get into galleries," says Otterness of the impetus behind CoLab, a group that included Jenny Holzer and Kiki Smith. "Our impulse was to do work in the real world, outside galleries and museums. We did cable programs; we did a magazine. We would fight like cats and dogs over how to spend what little money we had."

It was during this period that Otterness began thinking about sculpture. Interested in the faceless, generic figures used in international signage, he painted these until he was inspired to make them in three dimensions after seeing cheap plaster replicas of Jesus and Elvis in botanica shops in the Bronx. "I thought, 'Oh, this is public art,'" he recalls. "This is something everyone can afford and take home." He made plaster multiples of simple, six-inch androgynous figures—including a pair of lovers and a pair of fighters—and priced them at \$4.99 on stands outside Artists Space and the Museum of Modern Art during the 1979 holiday season. "I sold maybe 300," says Otterness. "In my mind, this was a big-scale artwork that spread out horizontally."

Otterness helped organize CoLab's 1980 "Times Square Show," which featured inexpensive works by some 150 artists installed in a rented massage parlor. His own contribution was a series of small plaster "proto-monuments" that sold for \$20 to \$40. "It was as if they were souvenirs from larger sculptures," says Otterness. He began showing with New York's Brooke Alexander gallery soon after.

IN 1983, IN PREPARATION for a show at Galerie Rudolf Zwirner in Cologne, he went to Italy for a year, where he learned the age-old technique of bronze casting that became his primary medium. There he also solidified his signature style of using cones, spheres, cubes, and cylinders as building blocks for his figures. He cites the geometric forms in early Kasimir Malevich paintings as an influence, as well as images created by New Deal-era WPA artists who looked at many cultures' motifs, from Mayan to Aztec to African, and tried to pare them down to a universal language.

Otterness also notes the importance of cartoons from the 1920s and '30s. He remembers poring over a German translation of a *Krazy Kat* book by George Harriman that he couldn't read but that fascinated him visually. "There were these different configurations of the road, the cat, the brick, the mouse, the cop, over and over," he says. Such cartoons helped him develop his standard types—white-collar workers, blue-collar workers, cops, radicals, captains of industry—which made their debut on four bronze picnic tables in the "Projects" show in the sculpture garden at MoMA in 1987. He cast hundreds of each type of figure in wax, he explains. "I could warm them up and literally twist them like Claymation, and make vignettes of movement and scenes really quickly. That was the driving method for the tables—and probably everything since."

Otterness has exhibited at museums and galleries around the world for the past two decades and is currently represented by New York's Marlborough Gallery, where his small and

medium-size bronzes sell for \$15,000 to \$200,000 and his monumental sculptures for up to \$1 million. He currently has an exhibition at Marlborough's Monte Carlo gallery through the 12th of next month and will show at the New York space next year. All of his gallery work is generated from his public projects, which he has completed in the Netherlands and Germany, and nationally in such cities as Cleveland, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and Spokane, with a high concentration in New York City. Kids who play in Battery Park in Lower Manhattan are certainly familiar with his chained-up bulldog glowering at a creeping cat; miniature figures playing chess; and an island built on a mound of bronze pennies and teeming with ankle-high creatures. The children may or may not recognize their home turf as a similar island of wealth.

REGARDLESS OF ANY SOCIAL message they may glean, kids seem to love Otterness's work. They scampered like Lilliputians over his 37-foot-long Gulliver, on view last year outside the Children's Museum of Indianapolis. (It was part of the traveling "Tom Otterness on Broadway" installation that will be on view at Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Michigan, as of June 1.) That hands-on approach to his art is fine with Otterness. "Durability is the big advantage with bronze," he says. "In Italy you see bronze that's been out for 500 years. The head of the baby Jesus on the Pisa doors or a little lizard down low gets polished up from people rubbing it, as though it must be lucky. People get into this. It's a kind of democracy."

This idea was put into practice at the subway station on 14th Street and Eighth Avenue in Manhattan, where in 2002 Otterness finished installing "Life Underground"—some 100 bronze vignettes of workers building the subway and alligators crawling out of drains. Poised on a handrail is a figure with a money-bag head that gleams noticeably shinier than the other sculptures thanks to subway riders' passing their hands across it.

The project took ten years—a record for both the artist and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which has commissioned more than 150 installations by artists—partly because Otterness kept adding more pieces at his own expense to allow for far more than what the \$200,000 budget covered. "I loved working with Tom Otterness on this because it was always about how he could make the project better," says Sandra Bloodworth, director of the MTA Arts for Transit program. "There are a lot of things happening within the work, which to me reflects the city. It can be read as the joy and whimsy that it brings, but it is also disconcerting underneath the humor. He's someone who brings complexities to the table."

A self-described "martial arts fanatic" who participates regularly in tournaments, Otterness says the disciplined study is helpful in navigating the multitiered negotiations of the public-art process. "The principles of tai chi—the soft overcoming the hard—come in very handy," explains Otterness, who currently has six public commissions in the works. "Often the first thing they want to do is throw you off the job if you're going to cause them any pain. In the best-case scenario, I yield to what they ask of me, but my feet stay in the same place. The challenge for me is to stay with it and put something out there on the plaza that still has some subversive element in one way or another. That's the game." ■