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By Kevin Lynch
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Splat! The city of Madison stands on the verge of toppling into a big wet public art mistake and emerging with permanent mud on its face.

A Madison Arts Commission project asked competing sculptors to "affirm the character of Madison and celebrate Madison 's famed State Street " in a water fountain sculpture on the corner of Frances and State, to be funded with \$230,000 of city money.

The Frances Plaza Public Art Selection Committee appears ready to forsake integrative beauty and symbolism for a good sales pitch to their priorities of art that 's interactive with children and impregnable from drunken climbers.

A clear choice among the five finalists stands waiting for the city to open its eyes. "Emergence " by Roger Stoller eloquently embodies Madison "coming into being, " as the artist explained in his proposal, which was the most fully-realized and thoughtful of all the finalists, according to MAC coordinator Karin Wolf.

Instead, the committee is talking up a "unanimous compromise, " a sculpture resembling a pair of giant creamless ice cream cones, with water squirting from one cone top to another. Sadly, it 's dripping with tasteless compromise.

I was troubled by the admission that artist Tom Askman had the crudest design proposal and no title for his work. But his pitch was the best, even poetic, Wolf says.

Are we looking for the best artist or salesman? A good pitch, or even a great poem, doesn 't even stand upright in the street.

Askman 's piece does discourage climbing while allowing people to enter its space. But as an aesthetic presence, it appears clunky and awkwardly top heavy. Askman has dubiously suggested that only one out of 500 passersby notices most public sculpture. He 'll get kids in on the act.

Progressive education made "interaction " a virtue. The god computer is making it a vice.

A really good public sculpture doesn 't need PDA -- stroking or fondling (or defacing, which "Untitled " also invites).

Does Askman 's art work appeal to the identity and sensibilities of the most people, to Madison 's character? The cone 's listening hole allows a child to hear gurgling water but with ambient noise and traffic, the effect will weaken.

What we 'll have is a gargantuan teething toy left in the middle of our community living room.

Delighted children will grow up quickly and want public art that conveys timeless beauty and symbolism of Madison -- as a vibrant community at one with the cycles of nature, which our verdant city naturally showcases. They will want "Emergence. "

Stoller 's inspiration is "Indra 's Net. " Indra, the Hindu god of space, lives in a celestial palace "that is a net stretching infinitely in all directions. " At every intersection of the net is a perfectly polished jewel "that reflects every other jewel in the net. "

The design sustains this exquisite and powerful metaphor. The coiling bronze plane embraces space; its web-like form conveys natural erosion and regrowth, integration and networking, and the dynamic relationship of diverse ideas.

"Emergence " mirrors Madison 's striving for an interdependent living environment in balance. One even senses our complex struggles in the form 's muscular, stretching tension.

The work also relieves the tension with its ingenious water mist mechanism, which will add literal atmosphere and, when it freezes in winter, a whole new ice sculpture.

"Emergence " is interactive in traditional ways: The curvaceous, eye-tugging form compels you to walk around it and see its beauty in different ways, one of the glories of excellent sculpture.

Should we cater to our children 's childishness or to their budding sense of beauty and awareness of the natural world and humanity 's relationship to it?

Children will soon discover that art can be played with, mentally or visually. Stoller 's pirouetting sculpture might even make them dance.

The public can view all five finalists and comment at the art commission 's Web site at www.cityofmadison.com/mac.

The selection committee will meet again and may come to a final decision on July 24.

Lynch is a journalist and artist who has written about art for 30 years. He holds a bachelor 's degree in sculpture and a master 's degree in English from UW-Milwaukee.

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