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Sculpture's NSFW angle becomes 'lightning rod' for online critics

By Lindsay Christians

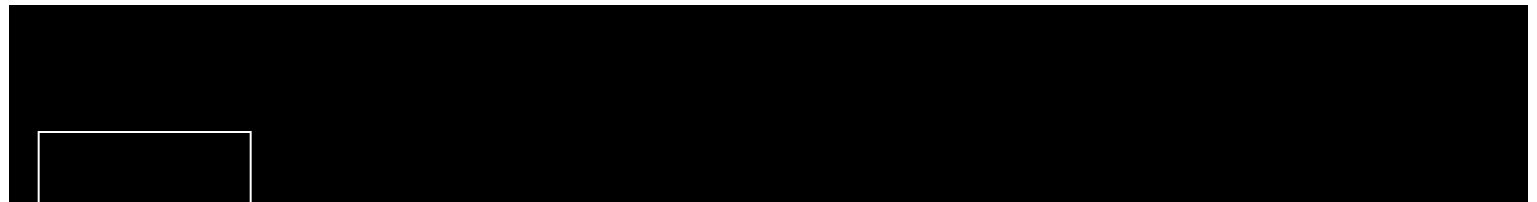
Jan 30, 2023





A sculpture by Daisaku Ueno created in 2016 was recently installed at the offices of the Madison Parks Division. It looks quite different viewed from the side.

COURTESY OF KARIN WOLF



Viewed from below, Daisaku Ueno's abstract, untitled bamboo sculpture looks amorphous, like a cloud.

From the side, though, it looks — well, not safe for work.

Someone at the new offices of the Madison Parks Division spotted a phallic resemblance and winkingly posted a picture to the Madison, Wisconsin subreddit, a social platform. “At least it’s well hung,” they wrote. (This poster later removed their handle and the image.)

Redditors, unsurprisingly, had a field day with this.

“It will really emphasize the shaft of light in the entry.”

“Still looks a wee off to me.”

“Great news, we’ve been sorely lacking in dick art ever since that statue outside Camp Randall got removed.” (Donald Lipski’s “Nail’s Tales” was installed in 2005 and removed in 2019.)

Madisonians love to hate on public art, and we’re not alone in this. Earlier this month, a bronze sculpture of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Boston drew “consternation and laughs”

after some saw a different body part than the artist intended.

Commenters about Ueno's piece clearly believed they were looking at a version of the truth. But David Wells, director of the Edgewood College Gallery, found it all a bit ridiculous.

"I find that interpretation to be completely absurd," Wells said. "We lived with that sculpture for five years and we never had any negative responses. It was hung in a different direction.

"I find that to be a reaction to a photo on Reddit, not a reaction to the sculpture."

Daisaku Ueno was among five artists who came to Madison from Japan in the summer of 2016. Ueno showed work at The Madison-Obihiro Sister Cities Art Exhibition, "Our Art Working," at the Common Wealth Gallery on Madison's east side.

Ueno, a sculptor from Hokkaido, made the piece here, and Wells recalled that he brought the materials with him. When that show closed, Ueno was one of two artists who donated their work to the city of Madison.

The city doesn't have storage space for art, and at the time it didn't have a place for the piece, which measures 8 feet by 7 feet by 2 feet. So City of Madison arts program

administrator Karin Wolf asked Edgewood College to take it on loan. Wells hung it near the gallery in The Stream, Edgewood's arts building.

“The artist said it can be hung in any direction, in any way, there's no up, there's no down,” Wells said. “While here it was hung vertically. It felt vertical. That was better for our space.”

Edgewood returned the sculpture last summer. Wolf found a place for it at 330 E. Lakeside St. near Olin Park, where the Madison Parks offices had just moved.

There, it made sense to hang Ueno's piece horizontally in the atrium. The piece was hung while Wolf was on vacation. She was sent a photo of it, and thought it looked fine.

“Perhaps it was just oriented in an unfortunate way,” she said. Now that online commenters have enjoyed themselves a bit, the city will make a change.

“We'll fix this,” she said. “This isn't a situation where we spent millions of dollars on a permanent bronze piece we can't change the orientation of, or put in a different space. We will address this, so people aren't disturbed by it.

“It might have started off as a joke, but ... people work in this space, and they're not going to be able to unsee that.”

Wolf regrets that Ueno's work was installed in a way that “doesn't represent the artistry.” But she understands that people will have a bit of fun with public art.

“This is part of what art does for a community,” she said. “It gives people an opportunity to express themselves. It’s a lightning rod.

“People love to hate, basically. And it’s safer to do that toward an object than toward one another. It’s better for a society.”

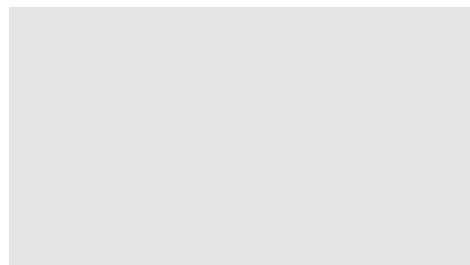
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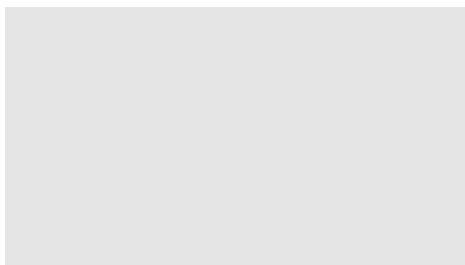
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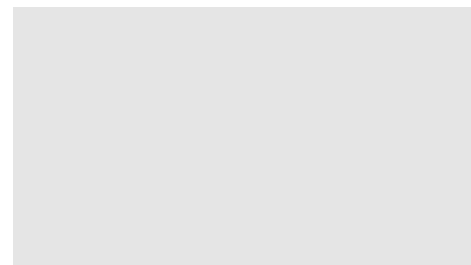
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