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ARTS

# Q&A: At Pennsylvania Park, Milwaukee artist Ray Chi makes art for inclusion

By Lindsay Christians Apr 1, 2018



Milwaukee artist Ray Chi is making a pair of metal sculpture pieces for Pennsylvania Park in Madison.

PHOTO BY MATT HAAS PHOTOGRAPHY

Artist Ray Chi started making sculpture because he didn't have the patience to be an architect. 2 of 4



That's ironic now, given his work on projects that take months to develop and involve hours of public critique and debate. Patience is an essential asset for anyone who makes public art, as Chi does, for city parks, libraries and once, a bridge over the Milwaukee River.

“With everything I do, by the end I feel like ‘I’m never gonna do this again,’” said Chi, an associate lecturer in the Department of Art and Design at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. “But I think it’s sort of like what they say about childbirth, that there’s this amnesia that happens where you forget the pain. After time passes, you remember the good, positive feelings.”

Chi’s submission for a pair of multicolored metal sculptures was recently approved for tiny Pennsylvania Park at 1915 E. Johnson St. It’s a \$40,000 commission, funded by the city through a federal Community Development Block Grant.

Chi’s idea was chosen over two other proposals, a sundial-inspired bronze column with text in relief by New York artist Suikang Zhao and a fanciful, brightly colored burst of a sculpture by Actual Size Artworks in Stoughton. Actual Size is the artist team of Gail Simpson and Aristotle Georgiades.

His concept was two words: WE and OUR, with silhouettes multicolored hands and trees to reinforce both the neighborhood and the natural surroundings.

“I never was a brooding type of artist. I usually have a smile on my face,” Chi said. “But last year was tough for me and for a lot of people, for mainly political reasons. There was a lot of negativity, feelings of divisiveness.

“My work is generally made with love and positivity, but this work for Madison is really trying to be more overt about it — using the platform of public art to communicate a message to people, beyond just looking good.”

The Cap Times caught up with Chi over lunch in Milwaukee, where he teaches and lives with his family. The Pennsylvania Park sculpture is on track to be completed and installed this fall along the Yahara River Bike Path.

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Ray Chi made a concept rendering of his proposed artwork for Pennsylvania Park, which the city has chosen to be installed off East Johnson Street.

RAY CHI CONCEPT RENDERING

**The Capital Times:** You've previously shown work in Madison as a sculptor, with that "Noodle Around" piece at the 2016 Wisconsin Triennial at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art. How did you start making public art?

**Ray Chi:** My background is in architecture, I have a bachelor's and a master's. I realized pretty quickly that I didn't think I had the patience to be an architect. I liked the idea of a project I could start and finish within a couple of weeks. The architecture projects my friends were working on were taking years. I wasn't ready for that pace.

I scaled down. I started making furniture-type objects in my studio. I was addressing all the issues I was interested in with architecture but in a more manageable scale. Now it's started growing again in scale. Maybe as I get older I'm starting to have more of that patience that I lacked. This public art phase seems to be part of that path, which may lead to architecture.

**It's interesting you say you're not patient. Public art seems to be as much about the process of neighborhood input as it is about the finished piece, and only some artists have the patience to deal with that.**

It's not easy, I will say that. Architects have more respect in some ways. Being delayed and going over budget, for building projects, is normal.

There's a lot of forces that work against you as a public artist. Making a sculpture for a gallery show seems so easy now, and fun. But it is really rewarding, that's why people who do it continue to do it. I still smile when I

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drive by the pieces I made for the East Library here (in Milwaukee). I think it makes other people happy too.



Ray Chi's sculpture, shown here in a concept rendering, is set to be installed in Pennsylvania Park this fall.

RAY CHI CONCEPT RENDERING

### **Why did you decide to use text in this piece, and how did you choose the words?**

Using text in art is new for me. I'm trying to address inclusivity, and I wanted the shortest and most to-the-point words I could think of. I kept coming back to those plural pronouns; they necessarily include more than yourself.

Looking at the site, there were two natural clearings at each end of the long park. There are a lot of trees there, but there happened to be two open areas that were well-lit by the sun. The park felt like a circulation space. There's a bike path and Johnson Street right next to it, and I imagined most eyes would be seeing it at a certain miles per hour.

To make something abstract or suggestive through form alone seemed like too much to process for that kind of viewing. I did want to have a quicker impact, and language is really direct. The juxtaposition of word and imagery takes it beyond signage, gives people something to think about as they continue

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driving.



**At a recent panel about public art, some people didn't agree on whether Madison art should be made by local artists or simply the best artist for the job, wherever they live. Where do you stand on that?**

What would be great is if there was a matching system, so if there was a specific budget spent on an artist from out of town or out of the country, that should be matched with local art support. It's hard to get into this world of making public art without having made public art. The first thing in the process is always a request for qualifications where you need to show public art works that you've done.

It's a big commitment for a city or community to want to do this — they want to see that you know how to manage a project of this scale and understand practical concerns. But there's so many people with amazing ideas that can never get past that first step.



Ray Chi's sculptures that say "WE" and "OUR" were chosen to be installed in Pennsylvania Park. This is a concept rendering of work set to be put in this fall.

RAY CHI CONCEPT RENDERING

**One of the biggest challenges with public art has to be responding to a wide variety of tastes and responses from the neighborhood. What's your approach to that?**

With this piece in Madison I'm not the one who has to live with it so I definitely want to make sure the city and neighborhood and community are good with it. Karin (Wolf, city of Madison arts coordinator) is doing a great job of involving the public as much as possible. Even before I got involved,



they'd already done some listening sessions. You can't please everybody, and people do love to hate sometimes.

I haven't worked with the city of Madison before. People are doing their jobs, and they're responsible for the safety of people and longevity of the artwork. But it does sometimes feel like it's people's jobs to tell you what you can't do.

Either there needs to be a cheerleader on board too, to help the artist keep a positive attitude, or they need to let go of the control a little, and trust that risk-taking is a part of art and can actually make a piece better.

**That's to do with the legacy of the piece.**

Anything special needs care. There's no such thing as art that is zero maintenance. If you design from the point of just thinking about vandalism and weather and rust, you're not going to produce the most creative sculpture.

**It's your job to have a personal creative vision based on what you hear from the neighborhood as well as your own skills and ideas. That's got to be a specific kind of challenge.**

Listening to the community and artists being open, that's all important. But the other way is also important, where the public and city needs to trust the artist. There's a reason why some people are artists ... there are sometimes ineffable, impractical things that the artist wants to explore that should be allowed, should be trusted. It's a two-way street.

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Since 2008, Lindsay Christians has been writing about fine arts and food for The Capital Times. She loves eating at the bar, going to the theater, fine wine and good stories. She lives on the east side with her husband, two cats and too many cookbooks.