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MONDAY, JULY 16, 2007

Timekeeper, the sculpture that everyone in Madison except me seems to think is a joke



I seem to be the only person in Madison who really likes this 1983 sculpture by American sculptor Robert Curtis, born in 1948. It's in Law Park between John Nolen Drive and Lake Monona (that's the Monona Terrace Convention Center in the background). It's one of the favorite examples that comes up when someone is bashing public art in Madison. This 1992 [Capital Times rant](#) by Jacob Stockinger is typical.

Robert Curtis' 1983 ``Time Keeper'' in Law Park - with its rusted steel beams and plastic arch topped with a motif like the letterhead logos of Madison Teachers Inc. - looks like abandoned leftovers from kids playing with Leggo and Erector sets. ``When are they going to finish it?'' asked two different friends.

ABOUT ME



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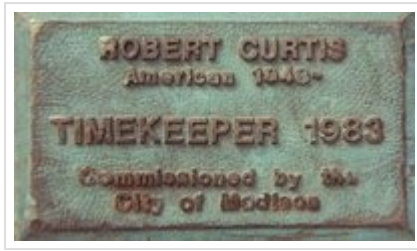
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I beg to disagree. Among other things, I really groove on Timekeeper's playful allusions to such Neolithic "timekeepers" as the monument at Stonehenge -- the observatory of its time that marked the crucial passing of the seasons. To me, the upright rod is suggestive of a sundial. The circular concrete arc suggests the circular shape of other prehistoric monuments (also emphasized by the stone in the center) and recalls the movement of planets around the Zodiac with the passing of the seasons. And above all, Timekeeper is playful. Under its own bright blue bit of stylized, sculpted sky, it seems to invite the viewer to participate in some mysterious, whimsical ritual. Plus, you can sit on it.

One big reason for the negative reaction is, I think, Timekeeper's inaccessible location -- to all but bicyclists, rollerbladers and walkers. To most people, it's a 2-second drive-by on John Nolen Drive -- and this is a work you need to wander in and around to really appreciate. Nor do people have much motivation to take a closer look.

It's hard to find out much about Curtis online, and I suppose that's partly the problem with public reaction to his work -- there's just not a lot of buzz out there. Most of his active career seems to have taken place before everything started to appear online. I did find this brief recent bio blurb from the [Indianapolis Art Center](#), but it's a Google cache html rendition of an MS Word document of unknown provenance, and I'm not sure the link will work on any computer that doesn't have my cookies. Anyhow, this is all it says:

Robert Curtis was born in Susanville, California in 1948. He attended the University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona State University, Tempe, and University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. He later taught at the School of Architecture, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He currently resides in Chevy Chase, Maryland. He has exhibited widely through the American Southwest and later, in Wisconsin, including many one-man exhibitions across the country.

And in the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Inventories of American Painting and Sculpture database, I found a brief reference to a 1987 two-piece sculpture called "Gateway" on the [University of Wisconsin-Stout](#) in Menomonie. But it's not a lot to go on, and I can only wonder wonder what happened to Curtis and his career.

Meanwhile, all I can do is to give his Law Park sculpture an affectionate wave every time I pedal past on the Lakeshore Bike Path.

1/31/08 Update: [Shot in the snow with a wide angle lens.](#)

6/25/08 Update: [A visitor to Madison analyzes the visual text of "Timekeeper."](#)

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POSTED BY MADISON GUY AT 12:33 AM 

8 COMMENTS:

 George Hesselberg said...

Make that two votes, then.

JUL 16, 2007 10:37:00 AM

 Madison Guy said...

One is an eccentric. Two is a movement...

JUL 16, 2007 10:49:00 AM

 Dr Diablo said...

I agree with you about this one, MadGuy. The complaints that it looks "incomplete" misfire, since it is clearly intended to suggest a ruin. I find it charming and evocative--a perfect spot for a reverie and a few cigarettes in the summer twilight.

JUL 16, 2007 3:51:00 PM

 Madison Guy said...

Yes, the suggestion of a ruin is another part of its appeal for me as well. Hey, that makes three of us -- practically a crowd!

JUL 16, 2007 9:00:00 PM

 Mary Ann said...

Well, I have a question. What is the red stone? Just a stone? I just don't get that part...

JUL 24, 2007 9:12:00 PM

 Madison Guy said...

I like to think of it as a kind of sacrificial altar where we may make our offerings to the gods of time -- though I'm not sure the time is right for that.

JUL 24, 2007 11:38:00 PM

 Anonymous said...

Thanks for post this great site and your right there is hardy anything known about him and I know him well.

OCT 21, 2007 5:34:00 PM

 Anonymous said...

Every public work of art in this City needs champions to ensure it is cared for and preserved. I am happy to know that you are on the team for Timekeeper. Please be in touch with me about this, one of your favorite pieces of art here in Madison, and more of your insights about Madison's cultural landscape. Karin Wolf, Madison Arts Program Administrator
kwolf@cityofmadison.com

OCT 22, 2008 3:47:00 PM

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