



Peter Gourfain: Roundabout and Fate of the Earth Doors

July 16, 2005 to July 1, 2007 | Paige Court

From July 2005 through July 2007, the Chazen (formerly Elvehjem) Museum of Art will present artist Peter Gourfain's large-scale sculpture *Roundabout*, 1976–1981, and the bronze-paneled *Fate of the Earth Doors*, 1997. *Roundabout*, a wooden piece constructed of nine equal ribs growing from a circular base and meeting at a nine-foot apex, will be installed in the Chazen Museum's Paige Court. *Fate of the Earth Doors* will be situated at the top of the museum's stairs that lead to the rest of the galleries, a focal point for all museum visitors. These are two of the most important works by Peter Gourfain, and this presentation will offer a special opportunity for museum visitors to see these large-scale works which are not available for viewing on a regular basis.

Despite an artistic career that began in the 1960s, Peter Gourfain has remained primarily on the outside of the commercially driven contemporary art scene. Born in 1934 in Chicago, Illinois, Gourfain attended the School of the Arts Institute of Chicago, receiving his BFA in 1956. Gourfain first emerged on the New York art scene in the 1960s. Early in his career his work was primarily minimalist in nature. Since the 1980s his work has become figurative, expressionist, personal, and socially engaged, created in a dramatic, often humorous, figurative style. Many of Gourfain's terracotta reliefs, large-scale urns, cast bronzes, woodcarvings, prints, and paintings deliver specific messages about political and social issues, often of universal importance. Considered a storyteller and chronicler of our times, Gourfain portrays the basics of the human struggle and his world contains a vivid commentary on social injustice in contemporary America.

From late 2001 to early 2002, the Chazen Museum organized the most ambitious exhibition to date of Gourfain's work. With partial funding from the Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission, *Peter Gourfain: Clay, Wood, Bronze, and Works on Paper* featured sixty works of art surveying Gourfain's career from the mid-1970s through 2001. This was the first opportunity for Madison area visitors to see *Roundabout* and *Fate of the Earth Doors*, two of Gourfain's most important works of art. Prior to the Chazen Museum exhibition, *Roundabout* was exhibited in 1987 as part of a solo exhibition of the artist's work at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. While in Madison, Gourfain was captivated by the city's progressive politics and museum visitors' enthusiastic responses to his work. After the close of the exhibition, Gourfain donated the work to the Chazen Museum with the knowledge that *Roundabout* would be seen by more people at the museum than stored in a warehouse near in Brooklyn, NY.

BACKGROUND

This exhibition brought the work out of storage and into the public eye. When *Roundabout* was on view as part of the Chazen Museum's 2001–2002 exhibition, it filled an entire gallery (Gallery VIII) and required the complete deinstallation of the Asian works of art normally on view in that space. Tucked away in a corner of the museum, *Roundabout* was not as visible to visitors as we would have wished. In this long-term exhibition, *Roundabout* will be installed in the central Paige Court so that all visitors to the Chazen Museum can see the work when they enter the museum galleries.

The structure of *Roundabout* is made of yellow pine floor joists salvaged from an old factory in Philadelphia. Twenty-two feet in diameter and nine feet high, *Roundabout* is decorated with ninety-eight individual narrative reliefs on the nine ribs of the piece. The ribs feature carved wooden panels alternating with clay panels inserted into hollowed out areas of the ribs. When he began the work of art in 1976, Gourfain intended to carve all of the figural reliefs from the wood structure. As he worked, the artist developed an allergy to wood dust that forced him to abandon his original plan and create the remaining reliefs in terracotta clay.

These ninety-eight reliefs feature fantastic images of figures, faces, flora, and fauna, all carved into the wood and brought to life in the terracotta sections inserted into the sides of the ribs between the carved reliefs. The narratives weave in both religious and art historical subject matter. Gourfain is inspired by the narrative emphasis of Romanesque art and its expressive and symbolic qualities. *Roundabout's* varied decoration depicts friends and family, a segment of the Last Supper, portraits of artists Vincent van Gogh and Bill Traylor, author James Joyce, and several Irish hunger strikers, as well as panels showing

Nicaraguans celebrating their revolution and several panels dealing with the violence in El Salvador. Roundabout, as notable art critic Lucy Lippard noted in the catalogue is "Gourfain's masterpiece to date, a fully successful hybrid between the abstract and the figurative. It weaves form, content, social optimism and pessimism, art of the past and present into a fabric that can be 'read' for hours."

For *Fate of the Earth Doors*, Gourfain began making the panels in clay in 1984, with the intention to make "a door about the earth." Upon a suggestion from a visitor to his work space, Gourfain decided to cast the work's twenty-four panels in bronze, a medium he had not worked with much prior to that point. This piece has been cast in seven bronze editions; one edition is installed at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. The museum's piece was completed in 1997. The theme of the doors is man's destructive relationship with the environment, an issue of great importance to Gourfain. Various panels depict historical to contemporary ecological scenes created in the artist's distinctive Romanesque style. The panels include scenes such as the demise of herds of buffalo on the western plains during the 19th century; Miniconjou Chief Big Foot at Wounded Knee; crowded Los Angeles freeways, and suburban housing developments. Critic Lucy Lippard saw this work both as an "ecological statement that marvelously intertwines a vocabulary of animals, birds, shells, fish, trees, plants" and an example of Gourfain's eclectic art-historical sources, blending Romanesque rhythms with "Ethiopian Coptic frontality and Celtic entrelac."

The installation of Peter Gourfain's *Roundabout* and *Fate of the Earth Doors* is supported by a grant from Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission with additional funds from the Endres Mfg. Company Foundation and the Overture Foundation; and Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin.

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The Chazen Museum of Art is open Tuesdays-Fridays 9-5 pm; Saturdays and Sundays 11-5 pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission to galleries and educational events is free. The museum is located at 800 University Avenue on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is accessible to wheelchairs from the Murray Street (north) entrance. Parking is available at the city of Madison's Lake Street and Frances Street ramps, University Lot 46 on Lake Street between Johnson and University Avenue, University Lot 47 on Johnson Street between Park and Lake streets. Evening and weekend parking is also available under Grainger Hall with entrance on Brooks Street between University Avenue and Johnson streets. The Chazen Museum of Art will provide sign language interpreters for associated programs by three-week advance request to Anne Lambert, Curator of Education, weekdays, 608-263-4421 (voice).