

YUE MINJUN

A-maze-ing Laughter



PUBLIC
ART
vancouver



About the Work

A-maze-ing Laughter features the wide open-mouthed laughter that is the signature trademark of Yue Minjun, one of the most prominent contemporary Chinese artists known today. The sculpture erected in Morton Park consists of fourteen bronze laughing figures. The happy faces are stylized caricatures of the artist himself. The intense comic facial expressions and oversized figures are intended to engage you, while the arrangement of the figures, with identical expressions but distinct gestures, constitutes a maze-like structure that encourages exploration and fun. You are invited to walk through the figures and laugh out loud if you may.

Yue Minjun was born in 1962 and grew up during the Cultural Revolution. He belongs to the generation of artists whose creative impulses were first suppressed by the totalitarian political culture and then unleashed in the reform period of the 1980s. In the 1990s, Yue became known for his paintings of laughing figures and his involvement with the art movement known as Cynical Realism. This movement was an apparent reference to and subversion of the Social Realism that dominated the art scene at the peak of the Communist-Socialist mania and that largely reduced art to an ideological propaganda tool. The artist's shrewd observation and unique

paintings capture the symptoms of the socialist culture of his time. The laughter is marked by eyes tightly shut, teeth bared, mouth out of proportion and wide open. The exaggeration is applied uniformly on all the figures depicted. Enigmatic as it seems, the laughter is interpreted by many as an indication of state politics acting on everyday life and therefore suggesting a kind of mentality under tight social control.

The laughing figures have become one of the most recognizable representations in Chinese contemporary art. In recent years, the popularity of the laughing face has extended into popular culture. Commercial replicas of the figures in different sizes and media have become "must-haves" for many who wish to be in sync with contemporary China.

The laughing figures have been growing in meaning over time. In the global context, the laughter has acquired a universal appeal since it has been showing and interacting with many different cultures. It is perceived as inviting playfulness and joy as well as provoking thoughts about social conditions. The artist often states that politics is rooted deeply in the cultural psyche and human nature, and therefore it is more meaningful for art to tackle the deeper roots that shape the politics. The maze is an important concept and recurrent theme in his latest works. For him, the structural interrelations of politics, religion and culture are like a maze, within which he as a player is trying to sort out the confusion.

— Dong Yue Su

Dong Yue Su works on the Chinese-language version of *Yishu—Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* and is assistant to Shengtian Zheng, Managing Editor of *Yishu* and senior curator of the Vancouver Biennale. Dong holds two degrees, a Master of Art and a Master of East Asian Studies, both from the University of Toronto. He is a veteran Chinese journalist.

Images Installation views of *A-Maze-ing Laughter*, 2009. Photos: Rachel Topham

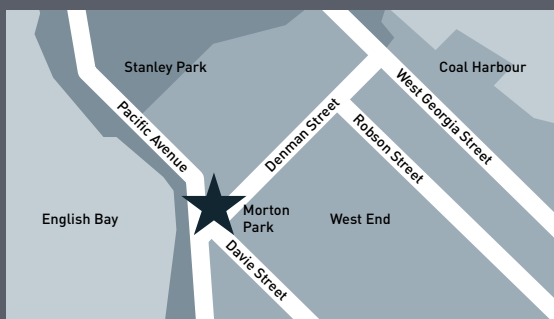


About the Artist

Yue Minjun's works have been exhibited and celebrated worldwide since the 1990s and once set the record at Sotheby's auction for contemporary Chinese art. His works have been collected by art museums including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Denver Art Museum, the Chicago Architecture Museum and many others in Europe and Asia. Another version of the laughing figures is installed at the Today Art Museum in Beijing.

A-maze-ing Laughter was donated to the City of Vancouver in 2012 by Chip and Shannon Wilson through their family foundation (Wilson 5 Foundation). The work was brought to the city as part of the Vancouver Biennale 2009–2011 by senior curator Shengtian Zheng. The Biennale, a registered non-profit charitable organization dedicated to exhibiting international contemporary art in public space, proposed the Morton Park site and inspired a rethinking on the part of the artist about how this work could reflect the site and be responsive to western society, outside the political concerns and religious ideology of China. This was a freeing opportunity for the artist, a Chinese national and a practicing Buddhist. Due to the overwhelmingly positive public reception, the Biennale worked with Yue Minjun and the Wilson 5 Foundation to secure *A-maze-ing Laughter* a permanent home in Vancouver.

The City of Vancouver Public Art Program commissions contemporary art for public spaces. The program supports excellence in art making by emerging and established artists, in new and traditional media and from stand-alone commissions to artist collaborations. Projects at civic buildings, greenways, parks and other public spaces are funded through annual civic capital budgets. Private sector projects are funded by developments in the rezoning process. Learn more about this and other public artworks in the Public Art Registry at www.vancouver.ca/publicart; subscribe to the Public Art Listserv to be notified of upcoming artist opportunities.



A-maze-ing Laughter, 2009, was donated to the City of Vancouver by Chip and Shannon Wilson through the Wilson 5 Foundation.

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Cover image *A-maze-ing Laughter*, 2009, Morton Park, Pacific Street at Denman, Vancouver, British Columbia. Photo: Rachel Topham

Yue Minjun photo courtesy of Don Li-Leger



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