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Art Flies Into Venice

Local sculptor builds carousel for Centennial Park

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Art Flies Into Venice

Local artist builds flying carousel for Centennial Park

By Bridgette M. Redman

A bit of history is coming to Venice's Centennial Park in the form of a flying carousel.

Harkening back to the days of Abbot Kinney and his carousel on the Pier, this new one is the brain child and love labor of public artist Robin Murez.

Murez, who has done several other projects for the park over the past several years, spent 2020 carving animals for the carousel, each of which tells stories about Venice, its history, and the lives of people who live there. She's planned it down to every detail and hopes to have the permits to install it in 2021.

The animals on a flying carousel are suspended from the center frame. As the carousel gains speed, the animals "fly" like swings. Murez's carousel is inspired by the original giant one that Kinney built for Venice as can be seen in the mural of Kinney in the historic Venice Post Office, but much smaller in scale. It is, she said, an interactive, no-tech art installation. The LED lights on the carousel will be solar-powered and the carousel itself will be powered by a bicycle.

Kinney's carousel was built by a premiere carousel company called Dentzel. When Murez began her research, she found out that the original builder's great grandson, William Dentzel III, was still making carousels that were smaller and manually operated. She learned that he

had built one in Davis, California that benefits groups of school children and was bicycle propelled.

"One of the things I love about Venice is that it is so walkable and bikeable," Murez said. "I've always loved riding my bike and there are so many people who do. I thought that's what made it perfect for Venice."

Designing the Carousel

Murez met with Dentzel, who agreed to donate his services to helping build the carousel. Then began the work of planning each animal and learning how to sculpt them. Engineer Bill Kelley and architect Mark Mack also joined the carousel building team and are donating their services.

Murez went to Oregon to learn how to carve carousel animals the old-fashioned way from a group of master carvers at Albany Carousel. She learned about the specific ways that carousel animals must be made to be safe and durable. She uses a bass wood and the animals are hollow. The animals have to be uniform in weight so that the carousel is balanced.

"There are a lot of particulars to working not only with wood, but to creating carousel animals that I've learned from the best of them," Murez said. "I've adapted my own sculpting techniques to this. The people I worked with in Oregon could spend up to eight years carving a single animal. That was longer



Venice artist Robin Murez is working on a flying carousel for Centennial Park that will tell the stories of Venice's history and people.

than my time frame would permit."

The first carousel animal took eight months as she learned how to do it. Subsequent ones have taken closer to eight weeks. The animals will all be varnished, but they won't be painted.

"I think the paint would just obscure the carvings, but everything else will be painted and illuminated with LED lights," Murez said. She has invited painters and the community to participate in the painting of the carousel.

Murez was recently offered a Nickelodeon, which is a player piano with bells, whistles and drums. It comes with many different music rolls. She's looking for someone to sponsor it so that they can make it bicycle powered also.

"That's a really cool, colorful

element that everyone is going to love," Murez said. "Maybe there is somebody who loves music who will come forth to be our sponsor of the Nickelodeon."

Installing the Carousel

Murez has been working with the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks to try to expedite the permits so that it can be installed before the end of 2021.

"It's just like building a home," Murez said. "You have to get permits and that goes through a process with the city. We've gotten preliminary approvals from the Department of Recreation and Parks, and Mike Bonin has expressed his support for the project. We also have the support of the Venice Neighborhood Council and the lead senior officer of the LAPD. She said

she thinks it is perfect for the park. We're crossing all of our t's and we have the best team of experts preparing all the documentation."

Murez said that many people have told her they are eager for the carousel to be installed, that it is something happy and wonderful to look forward to during COVID-19. Even after its installation, she expects there will be other artistic elements that are added to it as the years go by. When completed, the carousel will be open 24/7. Murez will be forming a not-for-profit corporation to help the carousel raise money through donations for community projects.

Murez pointed out that the Davis carousel makes \$60,000 a year in donations and she hopes hers will also raise money. She



Murez's interactive carousel will be powered by a bicycle, have solar-powered LED lights and will feature eight full-sized animals.

plans to use those donations for art, storytelling, programs for kids and the park, history and nature programs, and technology such as bicycle building.

"It's a gift that will keep on giving, hopefully for the next 100 years to the community," Murez said.

Animals and Stories

The flying carousel will have eight full-sized animals (one is an object), a chariot that carries two people and five children's swings. Murez is carving all of the big animals, the chariot and swings. She's inviting other artists to join her in carving and painting the rounding boards, which will be on the top perimeter of the carousel. She's asking each artist to interpret a different decade of Venice in their own style.

Each animal has been adopted/sponsored by different families. They then collaborate with her on the design so that there are multiple stories embedded in each animal. All the big animals,

the chariot, and the tricycle (which will power the carousel) have been sponsored but there are still openings for three people to sponsor swings.

The eight large swings include a rocketship, ostrich, pegacorn, lioness, Tongva turtle, L'Escargot (aka snail), duck and grunion.

Ostrich

The ostrich is the first animal Murez carved and it took her about eight months. It was far more complicated than many of the other animals. The ostrich is named Robbie and like all the animals, it tells a tale. When Kinney owned all the land from south Santa Monica to Marina del Rey, there was an ostrich farm.

In 1914, the Kinney Company spent \$100,000 to improve the Abbot Kinney Pier. Concessionaires opened an ostrich farm that was across from the Dance Hall. Above it was an observation tower with a telescope. It was destroyed with the rest of the Pier in late December 1920 when a

fire wiped almost everything out.

L'Escargot

In February 2020, Murez started work on an animal that is rarely found on a carousel: a snail. Sponsored by Ecole Claire Fontaine, a French immersion nursery school in Venice, the school's founder Joelle Dumas said she wanted to see a snail because children learn best when they learn slowly and snails represent that.

Dumas and Murez discussed how they could make it regal and what sort of stories of Venice could be represented on the snail. Murez settled on a crown and on it she carved several things that Kinney brought to Venice that moved slowly so that one could enjoy life—such as a miniature train and a gondola. The crown also tells the story of 2020.

"I started carving it in February 2020 and sure enough, COVID-19 happened," Murez said. "Corona means crown. The scientists named it the coronavirus

because if you look at the virus, it has points like a crown. So I included carvings of coronaviruses on the crown. It's another piece of history that will be great to look back on."

Rocket Ship

The one large ride that is not an animal is the rocket ship, which pays homage to science fiction writer Ray Bradbury. He lived in Venice throughout the 1940s and wrote a mystery novel set in Venice, "Death Is a Lonely Business."

"I got to hear him do a reading at the Venice Public Library, which is adjacent to the park the carousel is being installed in," Murez said. "I think it will be so much fun to get to ride a rocket ship on the carousel. That works on so many levels."

The Grunion

In December 2020, Murez finished making the grunion, a fish that is unique to the California coast. She was working in her studio when her neighbors,

Charles and Karen Rosin, dropped by. Murez asked their opinions of what the next animal should be. When she told them she was thinking of a grunion, Charles immediately said he would sponsor it. The couple, who are screenwriters, hold a special place in their heart for grunions.

"Charles grew up in LA and he told me he used to go out to the beach to find grunions in high school, as many people do and he never saw them," Murez said. "On his second date with Karen, they went to the beach to find grunions and there they were. He calls them the love fish and took it as a sign that this was the woman to marry and they did."

At first, she thought she would be carving two fish, until the Rosins brought their good friends, Marcie and Don Crouch, to co-sponsor. They talked about the mating rituals and how that could be repre-

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Top: Murez also plans to form a not-for-profit corporation to help the carousel raise money through donations for community projects.
Bottom: Adel Courtney Pearl rides one of the carousel's animals.



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sented. She ended up deciding to make one large fish that is female.

"The tail of our grunion wags like a fish," Murez said. "It will flutter back and forth as the carousel goes 'round.'"

Pegacorn

The Pegacorn, which is a flying unicorn, was conceived and designed by Emory Lim, a 5-year-old artist.

"She drew a pegacorn for me and that was what I used as the basis for carving the full-sized pegacorn," Murez said. "There are details that Emory asked for, little hidden fairies under the mane. She told me her name is the name of a rock daisy, so there are little rock daisies carved under the mane."

Lim and her family went out of the country for a few months as Murez worked on the Pegacorn. She asked Lim whether she wanted the mane and tail to be carved or to be hair and the young girl asked for hair. When Murez got it, she discovered that it tangled easily, so she decided to braid it and tie it with ribbons. She was concerned, though, that Lim, who knows her horses and artwork very well, might not approve. As soon as they returned to California, they came over to see the Pegacorn.

"She was thrilled with it and she immediately named it Ribbon," Murez said.

Tongva Turtle

Another animal on the flying carousel is the Tongva turtle, a creature that pays homage to the Native Americans who were originally in Venice and a 4,000-mile area around the Los Angeles Basin and the Southern Channel Islands.

The sponsors for the turtle are the Esfandiari Family and they made many suggestions for the turtle. The mother of the family grew up in Belize, where the national bird is a keel-billed toucan. So the turtle has a toucan riding on its shoulder. The boys of the family brought her some of their favorite toys, so on the turtle there is a miniature train, binoculars, a Godzilla, a boat, and more. She was especially pleased to be able to add the train because Kinney brought a miniature train to Venice when it had lots of canals. It would, Murez said, meander through the streets of Venice.

Rounding Board Portraits

Above the carousel elements will be five rounding board portraits of people who are part

of Venice's history. Murez is carving a bust of Kinney; his chauffeur and friend, Irving Tabor; his Venice decorator, Arthur Reese; actor Charlie Chaplin; and the Lizard King (aka Jim Morrison of the Doors.)

Barbara Mastag, Murez's neighbor, is carving the Lizard King. Morrison co-founded the Doors, whose first major hit was "Light My Fire," in Venice in 1965. Morrison called himself "The Lizard King."

Telling the stories

Murez has already begun spreading the news about the Flying Carousel. Alo Yoga, whose head of marketing lives in Venice, has donated face masks to the project. Murez stamps each mask with one of the carousel animals. People can select their favorite animal and she'll give them a face mask with that animal on it.

"We've already given out 300 and we just got 300 more," Murez said. "That's a fun thing to give out. We also invite people to print their own T-shirts."

When she's not carving animals, Murez teaches at Otis College of Art and Design. One of her students is developing a coloring book that will include brief stories of each of the animals. They expect they will post it on social media and it will be available at the carousel's concession.

Each animal will also have a plaque hanging above it that tells the name of the animal and the family that adopted it. Murez is also planning to build storyboards that will provide more information about the history of each animal.

"We will definitely have all the stories and try to put them together in ways that make them fun and interactive to discover," Murez said. "It's that discovery that makes the stories come to life."

Many of her other public art projects have incorporated Venice history into them, so it flowed naturally to the Flying Carousel. It's something that she has continually found inspiration from.

"I never really expected that history would be something that would be a source of my artwork, yet I find it not only resonates with me, but I think it completely draws the community in and makes the artwork public art that the community embraces and lets them take pride in their community," Murez said. ■

For more information, visit veniceflyingcarousel.com