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Meet the Artist Determined to Build Venice a New Carousel

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Robin Murez is on a mission: to bring art and wonder to Venice's public spaces. Over the past 10 years, the artist has installed her works, which reference the area's colorful past, on neighborhood streets, from Main to Abbot Kinney. Her newest project is her most ambitious one yet: transforming Centennial Park from an ignored strip of land between North and South Venice Boulevard to a community gathering place—complete with a recumbent bicycle-powered carousel.



Robin Murez at the Looff Hippodrome Carousel in Santa Monica. After several years of placing public art throughout Venice, she's determined to hand-carve figures for a bicycle-powered carousel to be placed at Centennial Park, between North and South Venice Boulevards, by next year. (Photo by Robin Murez)

Murez is aiming to have a full-scale carousel from the Dentzel Carousel Company installed on the Abbot Kinney Memorial Branch Library side of the park by 2018. Twenty feet in diameter, her proposed carousel can seat 15 riders (both adults and children) and be pedaled by a single person. Rides would cost \$1 and be overseen by a trained operator.

She plans to hand-carve the rotating creatures and icons (she currently spent time at Albany Carousel in Oregon to learn the craft), which will be suspended by poles and chains for seating on the "Flying Horse"-style carousel, with an eye to local history.

A Tongva turtle, in reference to the tribe's tale of the earth's formation and its frequent earthquakes; a winged lion, a symbol of Italy's Venice, which neighborhood founder Abbot Kinney used as a model; and a rocket ship, in a nod to author Ray Bradbury who lived in Venice from 1941 to 1950, are all planned carousel seats. Other ideas on tap include an ostrich (there was once an ostrich farm in Ocean Park), a grunion (which run the beach in spring) and a guitar (The Doors' lead singer Jim Morrison lived and wrote many of the band's lyrics in Venice).



From the Albany, Oregon Carousel carving studio: volunteers fitting Quigga the Quagga for stirrups. (Photo by Robin Murez)



Murez' carving table at the Albany studio where she spent much of last month studying the craft. (Photo by Robin Murez)

If that sounds a little bit crazy and like a lot of hard work, then you're on the right track. Venice has embraced its wonky side since its inception in 1905, and Murez admits to being an "instigator" when it comes to getting public art to the people of Venice, even as many artists have been pushed out of their studios and the neighborhood by Silicon Beach-induced rising rents.

An Artist in Venice

Murez, who grew up in West LA, knows the gentrification trajectory well. She had a semi-public art space and studio on Abbot Kinney for 13 years, from 2000 to 2013, where she hosted curious performances that included aerial shows and a one-ring circus. Like many of Venice's longtime artists, she had to move when the property was sold.

"I was hearing everyone complaining," she says, of those who were getting pushed out. "I didn't want to be a complainer."



Murez' Wheel of Fortune on Abbot Kinney. (Photo by Erin Behan)

She also didn't want Venice to lose its connection to its roots, not just to art and artists, but to its history as a rather crazy "mashup of Coney Island and Venice, Italy," a place where it was once possible to ride a camel, dance all night on the pier, and ride a gondola through the canals.

Murez has been educating the public about just those sort of colorful historical moments since 2005, when she started creating interactive art with an eye to placing the pieces on private and public property in the neighborhood—the bulk of it has been placed in the past three years.



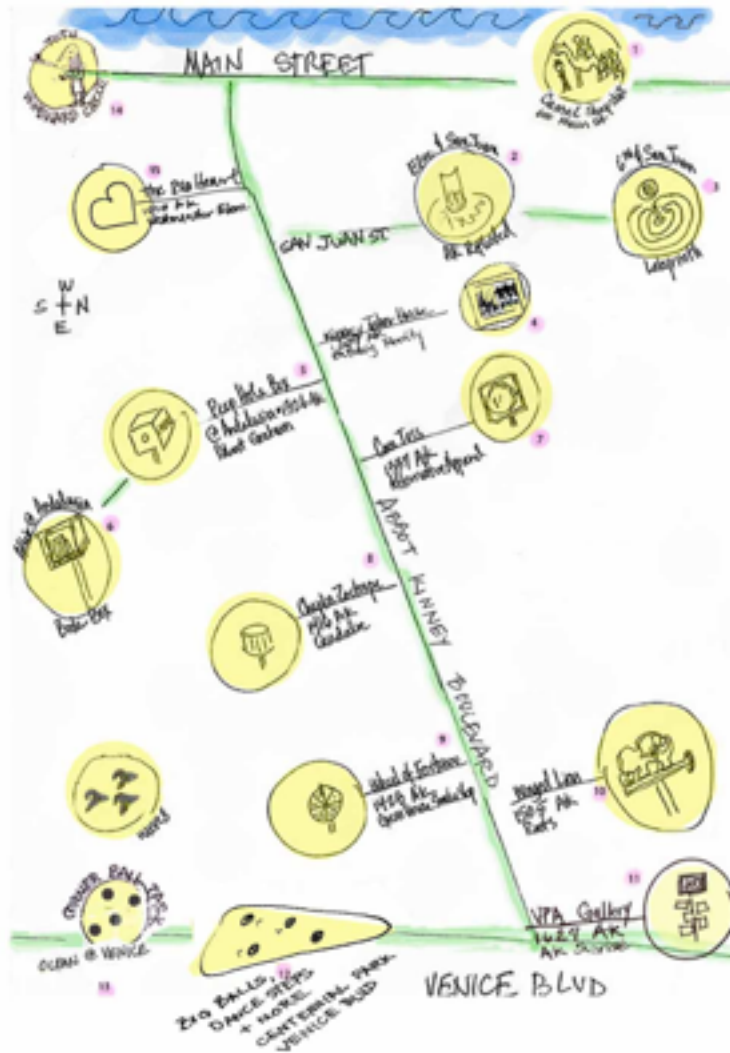
Peep Hole box on
Abbot Kinney.
(Photos by Erin
Behan)
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If you've ever walked Abbot Kinney, you've likely spotted one of her creations, like the Chaplin Zoetrope at 1416 Abbot Kinney, which memorializes Charlie Chaplin's second film in which he first portrayed the Little Tramp in *Kid Auto Races in Venice*, filmed in 1914 at Main and Westminster streets. Or maybe you've peeked inside the Peep Hole Box, at the corner of Abbot Kinney and Andalusia, for a glance at what Main Street looked like in 1910.

"My artwork tends to be unexpected, something you can enjoy, and, if you read the text, learn some history," she says.

Your MAP to Robin Murez'
VENICE PUBLIC ART.com
Find it on the streets & on the web



Map of Robin Murez'
public art installations
via Venice Public Art

Rejuvenating Centennial Park

Originally meant to be a sculpture park, Centennial Park was until recently largely ignored. Its benches were torn out to discourage transients and there wasn't much of a reason to visit. Improvements, spearheaded by Murez, have started to change that. A small grant has allowed Murez to update the landscaping, and she's arranged for members of Safe Place for Youth (a local organization that serves homeless children) to help the Department of Recreation and Parks weed and maintain the plantings.

Design proposal for Venice's Centennial Park. (Photo via Venice Public Art)

Murez has also installed four of her mosaic sculptural balls—each has an element that references Venice history, and she's working on getting her Labyrinth landscape sculpture moved to the site, as well as updating her Dance Steps installation that allows visitors to practice the cha-cha on numbered steps outlined on the ground.

Also in the master plan for the park is the establishment of a Venice Heritage Museum, which would include the placement of a Pacific Electric Red Trolley Car and a replica of the Tokyo Station, which was once a hub for folks taking the train from downtown LA to Venice until the 1950s when it was razed.

The park's piece de resistance, however, would be the carousel, which also has some Venice history. There was once another Dentzel Carousel, impressively sized with 72 animals, at Pickering Pier. It ran from 1920 until its destruction in the great January 6, 1924 fire. Murez is determined to bring it back.

"I love storytelling, so my work is also very narrative. There's this wealth of very wonderful stories [about Venice]. The more we all learn them, the more we enjoy our own existence," she says.

A Community Collaboration

Murez is working on getting final approvals from all the appropriate agencies for the carousel installation. City Councilman Mike Bonin's office has been "supportive" of her plans, she says, as has the Department of Recreation and Parks, but what she really needs is funding. Once the project is fully approved and the money is in order, the carousel can be up and running in six months, although it won't have the full arsenal of custom-designed creatures until 2018, she says.

It's not a small sum. Murez is looking for donations towards the estimated \$200,000 it will cost to fabricate and install the carousel, build the drive train to run the carousel, make and install a roof enclosure and fencing, create the carousel creatures themselves, secure permits and insurance, pay legal fees, and continue operating and maintaining the structure. For details on making a donation, visit her website VenicePublicArt.com. She's also looking for in-kind donations, like a contractor to help with construction, a business to donate lumber and other goods and services to help offset costs.

Murez is hoping to get the needed money a number of ways, including from private and corporate donations, crowd funding (she's floating the idea of having people buy bricks in the park), and city funding. Some of the costs will be absorbed by her. "Most everything I do is pro bono," she says.

Once the carousel is operational, any proceeds would go to local charities, and she's hoping to get other artists involved in carving pieces and local businesses committed to helping. Local bike shop Bike Attack has already expressed interest in helping create and maintain the bicycle part of the carousel. Venice Metal Worxs is on board to make the fencing. ARUP is handling engineering. And Murez has ideas to add other bike-powered items, like a cotton candy machine, a smoothy blender, cell phone charger and the like.

More than anything Murez wants to get the entire community of Venice connected to the past, while working together to create public spaces that can be enjoyed in the present.

"If we just sit back and say, 'Why isn't this being done ...' No. We can just make it happen. It's quite satisfying," she says. "Public art is great when it has these different layers, involvement of the community, beautifying, edifying."

For more details and information on getting involved, connect with Robin Murez at Venice Public Art

Erin Behan

Erin Behan moved to the West Coast in 2014 after a long spell in square-foot bereft New York City where she was an editor at various online travel and entertainment sites. Since moving to the land of sunshine, sand and endless summer, she's written for publications such as LA Weekly, LA Magazine and Rough Guides. She lives in Santa Monica's Sunset Park neighborhood with her husband, two boys, and two cats.