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BEHIND THE SCENE

A concession-stand sculpture at Mass MoCA



By Eryn Carlson | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 02, 2015

Who: SuttonBeresCuller, a Seattle-based trio of artists

What: “Big Top Grand Stand,” a large migratory sculpture responding to the transience of festivals, fairs, and circus-like environments

Where: Massachusetts MoCA, 1040 Mass MoCA Way, North Adams

Transitory by nature, festivals, fairs, and attractions like circuses pop up for days at a time before disappearing again, leaving little more than patches of dead grass and lingering scents of deep-fried foods in their wake.

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Wanting to pay homage to those transient fetes, SuttonBeresCuller — the moniker of Seattle-based trio John Sutton, Ben Beres, and Zac Culler — created “Big Top Grand Stand,” a large migratory sculpture that fittingly debuted at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art last weekend, coinciding with Wilco’s Solid Sound Festival. Standing nearly 40 feet tall, the piece is a vibrant tower of whimsy backdropped by the Berkshires’ verdant rolling hills, and serves as the perfect response to the temporal and often flashy infrastructures ubiquitous at festivals like Solid Sound.

“We wanted to create an abstract monument to that by creating a mobile, expanding sculpture,” said Sutton, who has been collaborating on multidisciplinary projects with Beres and Culler for 15 years, since they met at Seattle’s Cornish College of the Arts. “We wanted to celebrate and play with that transitory environment, but strip it of its text and subvert it.”

In its migratory form, “Big Top Grand Stand” sits atop a double-axle flatbed trailer, looking just like a concession truck; all it lacks is branding and people queued in front, waiting for mini doughnuts or fries. However, the single structure is actually four units nestled into one. When installed to full form with help from the scissor lift hidden

within, the four unique structures are stacked atop one another, amounting to a flamboyant ziggurat garnished with colorful flags and pinwheels. An ice cream pushcart, complete with a rainbow umbrella, tops off the structure.

SuttonBeresCuller first conceived of “Big Top Grand Stand” in 2011, when the Minnesota State Fair asked the trio to propose a piece responding to the sights and sounds of the midway. The project didn’t come to fruition that year, but was still in the back of the artists’ minds and sketchbooks when Mass MoCA curator Denise Markonish, who was organizing a circus-themed exhibition as part of Toronto’s Scotiabank Nuit Blanche Festival last fall, approached the group. It was the perfect opportunity for them to actualize their vision.

The project was a monumental undertaking. “Big Top Grand Stand,” Sutton said, was the group’s largest and most complex project to date considering all the calculations involved to construct the piece and ensure it was safe for transport. The whole process took about six months.

“[The best part] was going from our concept and the sketches we had made four or five years before,” said Culler, adding that the end product was very close to the original designs.

In Toronto and now at Mass MoCA, people’s reactions have ranged from childlike amazement to confusion. Conditioned to be enticed by the colors, bright lights, and garish features of carnival-like structures, passersby often expect “Big Top Grand Stand” to be an amusement or vendor of sorts.

“A lot of people get confused. They come up and say, ‘What is this, what are you selling?’ ” said Beres. “There is a level of inaccessibility about it that frustrates people.”

For the trio, Beres adds, challenging people’s perceptions about their environments is part of the point.

“We’re trying to have people question things around them. If we were selling popcorn out of it, they wouldn’t question it.”

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