

PUBLIC ART CENTER OF ATTENTION

SECTION

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Art: Pendulum combines time and space

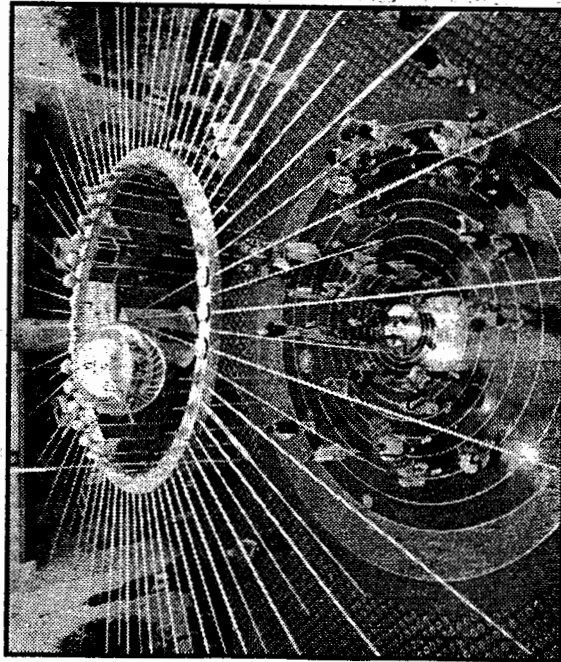
New center sets backdrop for works on a grand scale in both thought and scope to make lasting impression

By RANDY GRAGG
of The Oregonian staff

Art is everywhere in the new Oregon Convention Center — on the walls, outside, inside. You can see it and hear it. It hangs above you, and it's under your feet. In one case, it lights the walls. It's even in the bathrooms.

From paintings to an enormous brass pendulum, from computer-controlled Oriental bells to drawings of spiders on restroom tiles, 10 works of art and designs by 13 artists reside in the half-million-square-foot center. That art will officially be unveiled at 8 p.m. Saturday; the three-day grand opening celebration begins at 10 a.m. Friday, Sept. 21.

More than three years of planning and a price tag of nearly \$700,000 make this the largest, most complicated and expensive public art project in the state's history.



The Oregonian/MICHAEL LLOYD

It is also the most important, the most adventuresome and the most mixed in its successes and failures.

The Metropolitan Service District passed a new "1-per-cent-for-art" ordinance especially for the convention center. That resulted in 1 percent of the original estimated construction budget — \$475,000 — being used for art. The National Endowment for the Arts kicked in an additional \$95,000 and the Oregon Arts Commission \$10,000. Private contributions and in-kind donations made up the final \$100,000.

What did that money buy? Three of the most exciting public projects ever created in Oregon, several serviceable examples of architectural decoration and, last but not least, some very silly bathroom art.

In a sense, the convention center building, principally designed by architect Robert Frasca, is itself a work of art. The twin towers on the east bank of the Willamette echo both the nearby steel bridge and the distant peaks of Hood and St. Helens. The building is Frasca's and Port-

New York artists create a pendulum piece that sweeps the cosmos

In the endless discussions of what public art means to the public, a subject that frequently gets overlooked is what the art means to the artists who make it.

For New York artists Kristen Jones and Andrew Ginzel, their pendulum project at the Oregon Convention Center means a lot.

This soft-spoken, earnest and young couple (both are in their mid-30s) have gained an international following for their collaboratively created large-scale, temporary artworks. Using ordinary objects and materials like woks, plumbobs, fishing line and chalk dust, they have

created numerous public installations. Ranging from slowly moving store window moonscapes to lighting the cavernous towers of the Brooklyn Bridge with thousands of cobalt-blue fireflies, the work of Jones and Ginzel is always aspiring to the cosmic.

Their work often is temporary, more performance than sculpture. In a phrase, here today and gone tomorrow.

"You feel a little foolish," said Jones as she was overseeing the installation of the pendulum, "destroying work in an art world so obsessed with permanence. It also has always seemed a little wasteful."

The convention center pendulum is the

couple's first large-scale permanent work. Its huge, brass ball swings in the north tower of the convention center, surrounded by a goldleaf crown and a terrazzo solar system on the floor below.

With a price tag of \$167,000, far larger than any budget the couple has worked with in the past, the project will no doubt give Jones and Ginzel the credentials to do more permanent works.

"Choosing us on behalf of the community was a real leap of faith in our work," said the soft-spoken Jones.

It was also an investment that paid off in gold.



New York collaborative artists Andrew Ginzel and Kristen Jones gain a following.

land's most sculptural structure, a monument to bilateral symmetry, from its aortalike floor plan to its penetrating contribution to Portland's skyline.

For a contextualist like Frasca, who usually prefers his buildings to reflect surrounding architecture, the convention center is unusually adventurous. It's also a good photo-op, an important concern since most potential patrons of the new convention center will encounter it first in pictures.

But Frasca has done more than create brochure fodder with his towers. Their natural light and vast cathedral-like spaces are both ideal and nearly impossible settings for art. What is likely to be the biggest crowd-pleaser of the convention center art is the perfect solution.

New Yorker's Kristen Jones and Andrew Ginzel have designed a brass pendulum that swings high above the center's floor in the north tower. A 15-foot-wide ring hangs just below with some 38 fiberglass points that extend both inward and some 13 feet outward.

The inner points will rise to the call of the pendulum's swing as the ring turns with the Earth's rotation. When the ring has made a full turn, all the points will briefly be up. Painstakingly gold-leafed, the ring and points create a blazing sunburst. Then simultaneously, like the hands of bowing worshippers, the points fall.

On the floor, some 20 feet below the pendulum's swing, Jones and Ginzel have designed a terrazzo solar system marked by concentric brass rings and inlaid marble planets. A thin black wedge marks magnetic north, an arbitrary, earth-bound counterpoint, to the pendulum's cosmic motion. Called "Principia," the work is more of a ceremony than a sculpture.

As the pendulum marks time inside with its metronomic swing, two bronze Oriental bells outside will mark time in sound. In a project conceptualized by composer Robert Coburn, Portland's sister cities Sapporo, Japan, and Ulsan, South Korea, each donated bells. They will be struck with a computer automated device according to a composition created by Coburn.

collected his score, but he explained his two main goals are to orient people to the convention center's outdoor spaces with what he describes as "soundmarks" as opposed to landmarks. And, he wants to call attention to two scales of time.

"The intention is not a musical composition," Coburn said, "but to make references to how we measure time versus how nature does." He explained that the Sapporo bell will be struck hourly while the Ulsan bell will be struck on a daily and seasonal cycle. "On the equinox and solstice, they will be struck together at noon," Coburn added.

Three other wind bells, donated by Taiwan, will resonate when a breeze blows.

In addition to the pure aesthetics of sound and the marvel of seasonal rhythms, Coburn's bell project also represents a cultural handshake, an anticipation of the growing economic friendship between Portland and its potential Pacific Rim trading partners.

Seattle artist Buster Simpson is also interested in blending nature with Oregon's economics. However, because of uncertainties over the final art budget, Simpson's project will barely be started by the convention center's opening. In concept, though, it is the most radical of the artworks.

Simpson plans to place an 80-foot log, salvaged from existing downfall, sectioned and fluted like a classical Greek column on the grounds facing the convention center's long, curving, north wall. A stainless steel pipe running along the crest of the log will water it, helping to eventually rot it. Like a fallen tree in the forest, Simpson's log will become a "host" for new trees.

Simpson will plant a sampling of Oregon trees, but also hopes seeds carried in naturally will germinate. "What is the most suitable to the environment will survive," he said.

As Simpson himself put it, his project is "a confrontation" with those who think public art has to be a permanent object. "People aren't interested in thinking a hundred years down the road," he said. "They want something complete, and they want it now."

Simpson's project, which he plans to complete before winter, will bring Oregon's timber economics together with nature in a poetically thoughtful, productive and non-confrontive landscape, something at which politics has failed.

The other artworks are more conventional. Like so much of Portland's public art, they mainly serve to humanize the architecture. The only difference is scale. The enormous blank walls in the center's two lobbies gave Portlander Lucinda Parker and New Yorker William Hoppe the opportunities to create a grand pair of paintings.

colorful, expressionist celebration of pigment might have failed at this size. Forty-four feet long, "River Song" is Parker's largest painting ever. A frame of swirling, spiraling looping currents of paint, each with the name of an Oregon river scrawled in it, surround a central mingling of fish and more flows. Like the human body and Frasca's building, Parker's composition is bilaterally symmetrical. The striations of multicolored paint in each flow seem as much like muscle tissue as water in this striking work.

It's hard to imagine a painting more suited to its surrounding architecture than Bill Hoppe's "Portal." Arches abound in this 42-foot composition, ranging from the edges of leaflike shapes to radar scans that also could be a windshield wiper sweep. As a whole, it exudes a sense of motion, time, nature and regeneration and lightly echoes both the forms of the building and the themes of the other artworks.

On the long, curved wall of the lobby interior are a series of more than 30 collaboratively created, metal plaques. Historian Terrence O'Donnell selected texts ranging from pioneer recipes to American Indian legends, which artist Dennis Cunningham has illustrated. Designer John Laursen has elegantly fused them into a funny, poignant and richly varied portrait of Oregon. Each of the plaques is lit with an elegant lighting sconce created by Seattle glass artist Walter White.

In the "VIP" room, adjacent to a garret overlooking the lobby, hangs an appropriately tame Tom Fawkes painting of the Washington Park Rose Garden.

While none of the convention center artwork would be deemed offensive by a congress of nervous politicians, a committee of arachnophobes might get a little upset by Elizabeth Mapelli's contribution to the women's restroom. In several of the stalls, Mapelli has placed floor tiles silkscreened with spider silhouettes and drawings of roses. Over the urinals in the men's room, she has placed pictures of Oregon's waterfalls.

The very notion of commissioning art for bathrooms is questionable, and the sexist overtones of Mapelli's imagery doesn't argue well for it. As one woman put it, "She's helping men to relieve themselves and inhibiting women."

Mapelli also has created plaques picturing Portland's various cultural attractions and California artist Gordon Bryan has made ceramic friezes of fish jumping around the Portland Building for the bathrooms. Efforts like these make sense for posters sold at the Saturday Market, but when compared with dramatic successes of other artworks in the convention center, they are trivial.