

New public art explores race, gender, stereotypes

By Michael Booth
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At a time when politically incorrect statements have embroiled figures including the president of Harvard and a University of Colorado professor, Denver is about to unveil a prominent, publicly financed sculpture that probes race, gender and stereotypes in three-dimensional force.

Near the busy City Park golf clubhouse today, a crane will lift into place "Meeting of Minds," featuring two giant steel heads — that of a large African-American female in the foreground and that of a diminished white male in the background.

According to the city's public art chief, the piece is meant to symbolize the "different approaches men and women take to building their belief systems."

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"While males have the tendency to be more rigid in their approach, the female approach tends to be more organic. 'Meeting of Minds' reflects the receding 'rigid' approach, with the 'organic' approach taking prominence," said John Grant, Public Art Program director.

Commissioned with \$52,000 in city funds, Douglas Kornfeld's sculpture intentionally looks out over a prominent crossroads of the races: The African-American woman looks north toward neighborhoods with the most black residents in Denver; she and her "female" way of thinking appear triumphant over the dying white male. In a further cultural mash-up, City Park was one of the first public courses to welcome black players, yet golf remains the icon of white country-club privilege.

If that has not raised enough questions, Kornfeld has also crammed each of the figures' "brains" with hundreds of the international gender symbols that delineate men's and women's bathrooms, though some of the figures are distorted to highlight the absurdity of a generic tag for a diverse population.

Kornfeld, who grew up near City Park before settling in Massachusetts, does not expect torch-lit marches on his sculpture by angry white men and talk-show hosts with megaphones. He is not, he says, a flame-throwing artist, and the reaction to his past work reflects that.

But he quickly adds that good public art does raise many questions, some uncomfortable.

"If art is totally accepted and doesn't cause any controversy, then I as an artist am not doing my job," said Kornfeld, who will be in Denver today supervising the installation of his piece. "Part of my role is to ask people to think differently."

In the kind of irony that enriches art,

Kornfeld said he lives "down the street" from Harvard University president Lawrence Summers and is well aware of the trouble Summers has gotten into. Summers startled and angered female academics in mid-January with a speech speculating that innate gender differences may keep women from consistently reaching as high as men in math and science. Words such as "organic" and "rigid," sweet and harmless in one context, can clink like handcuffs in another.

Closer to home, University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill is under withering fire for comparing World Trade Center victims to a Nazi genocide technician. He resigned as chairman of the ethnic-studies department.

Kornfeld said he considers the gender issues of his piece far less important than the overall message he meant to convey with the broad circle surrounding both human heads, symbolizing the unshakable unity provided by American democracy.

Whatever his intentions, Kornfeld's piece is bound to provoke "a continuum of reaction," said public art and communications expert Tamara Gillis, a profes-

sor at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. Gillis studied photos and descriptions of Kornfeld's piece.

"You'll have a large percentage of people who will look at it and say, 'That's pretty.' And they won't look for deeper meaning," she said. "Then you'll have a smaller percentage of people who look for an agenda and want to read into it the symbolism of race and gender, the ones who are itching for a fight because it's public money."

Gillis said that Denver's Public Art Program has a good reputation nationally and that the city shields itself from undue controversy through a juried selection process and multiple reviews for artists such as Kornfeld.

"Good public art does provoke discussion — not fights, but debate and discussion," she said.

City officials involved in the review like the sculpture and the ideas it explores.

Harriet Hogue, an African-American in Denver's Parks and Recreation administration and a former supervisor of City Park, said the juries pick artists with interesting concepts but do not dic-

tate what the final work looks like.

Kornfeld frequently uses the gender symbols to explore diversity, including a mosaic on the wall of RTD's Civic Center underground bus station. Kornfeld has numerous public commissions, from Maine to Washington state.

Kornfeld's "Meeting of Minds" does speak "to a number of the cultural and historical issues we discussed in the meetings," Hogue said. "I think the public will be pleased."

Money for the sculpture comes from the "One Percent for Art" program, which requires that part of public works spending be used for public art. The new sculpture, near the golf clubhouse at East 26th Avenue and York Street, comes from work on roads near the zoo and the rebuilding of the clubhouse.

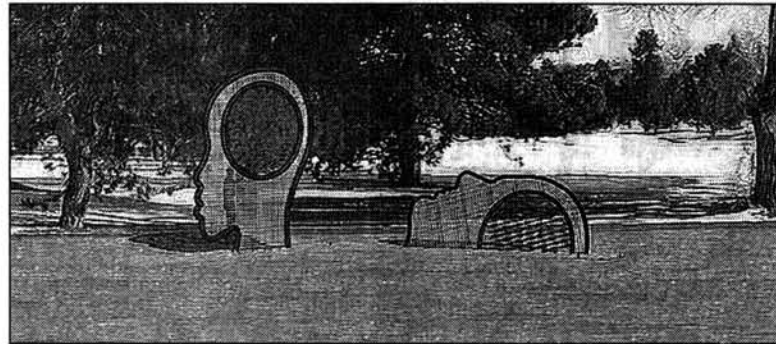
Kornfeld's piece may not be as controversial as a current New York photography exhibit on white privilege, "White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art," at the International Center of Photography. But the curator of that show said any sculptor professing to create an iconic African-American or white image must brace for criticism. Kornfeld, who is white, used an African-American model for the upright head, but just what makes a human feature typical of one race or another is always touchy, curator Maurice Berger said.

"Blackness is as varied as whiteness is," Berger said. "It has to be a very sophisticated and rigorous approach."

But if you're going to have a dialogue, Berger said, why not have it over art instead of in a more volatile arena such as politics?

"Sometimes art is the teaspoon of sugar that makes the medicine go down," he said.

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An artist's rendering shows what "Meeting of Minds" will look like after it is installed in City Park today. A public dedication is scheduled for April 22.