

XChange rates

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A citywide celebration of public art, Nasher XChange marks the center's 10th year. Do the works justify the ambitious project?



FLIGHT OF FANCY | Ruben Ochoa's 'Flock in Space' at Trinity River Audubon Center is a stellar contribution to the Nasher XChange. (Photography by Arnold Wayne Jones/Dallas Voice)

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When the Nasher Sculpture Center announced early this year that it would commemorate its 10th anniversary with Nasher XChange a citywide, 10-site art project — the only museum-sponsored event ever of its kind in the U.S. — it was met with raves for its ambition. Now that the project has officially opened, it can be fairly called a worthy and wonderful idea, even though individual projects do not fulfill the early promise.

That's to be expected when art is presented side-by-side for evaluation. Some pieces will speak to different audiences; some won't speak at all. It happens at film festivals, and in revolutionary art exchanges.

Of the 10, one (the promising painted pier at Fish Hook Lake by Ugo Rondinone) was not completed in time for the debut; another, a multimedia piece including performance (from Good/Bad Art Collective), was available on opening day, only to close for retooling until November; a third, *Buried House*, is a

conceptual piece that falls short of art; and another, a monthly street fair in a diverse Dallas neighborhood (organized by Rick Lowe), can be considered “art” only in the most liberal sense, and is in no way sculpture. Two other installations have to be properly called “signage” more than art themselves, and three others are in contexts that merely recall the usual public projects.



IN THE OPEN | Charles Long’s ‘Fountainhead’ at NorthPark Center turns Ayn Rand’s self-interested dogma on its head, above; Rachel Harrison’s ‘Moore to the Point’ draws attention to great public art already available in Dallas, below.

With all these qualifications, how can the project be judged a success?

Art isn’t always about big ideas, but Nasher XChange is a big idea, and the commitment by the Nasher folks to deliver a gift to the people of Dallas to provoke a discussion, promote art in the community and trigger enthusiasm is laudable. The exhibition, which runs through Feb. 16, does all that collectively, even if individual pieces miss the mark.

Take, for instance, two of the pieces that sit in “traditional” art settings: *Music*, by Alfredo Jaar, is a green Plexiglas pavilion on the campus of the sculpture center. Walk inside, stand silently and wait until eventually you hear the sounds of babies crying. And you will hear that sound, every day of the installation, at the same moment of the day when that child entered the world. By the end, more than 5,000 newborn coos will echo in the chamber, an audible reminder of the expansion of life.

A second, also on a Nasher-owned property, is *Fountainhead* by Charles Long, located in NorthPark Center. NorthPark has long been a kind of retail museum, featuring many Nasher works over the years. The piece’s name, evoking the radical social engineer Ayn Rand — plus the images of dollar bills flowing along an abstract shape — suggest an ode to consumerism, and in some ways, it is. But Long undercuts that, blurring the lines between art, charity and conspicuous consumption. If you make a monetary contributions at one of the attached kiosks, it changes the visual (and, like Jaar’s piece, auditory) program

and shows the donation entering the flow of money. It's thoughtful and profound and, remarkably, very practical.

But here's the thing with both: Set at a museum and a mall, they are art pieces that might have existed in the public square anyway. Does the Nasher XChange make them *more* so, simply because they are lumped together with eight other works?

Well, I think that's almost the point of Nasher XChange.

The same could be said of *X* by Liz Larner. Located on the campus of UT Dallas, part 1 is the model of another piece which will soon be positioned outdoors (it's not complete). Until then, *X* — a bulbous, undulating sculpture of maplewood pieced into a fluid X shape — sits inside the new ATEC building at the college ... not unlike a work you might encounter in a new building dedicated to art and technology. Again: Does it resonate as part of a larger project? (And why couldn't it remain after the exhibition officially ends?)

The best of the lot is *Flock in Space*. Ruben Ochoa's evocative rendering of birds in flight, as expressed by twisted lengths of galvanized steel posts and concrete fence footings, moves with elegance and grace, even as you realize its components are heavy, ugly and commonplace. It fits perfectly with its setting, the entrance of Trinity River Audubon Center along the great hardwood forest just south of Downtown. The area was, for decades, an illegal dumping ground, so using vernacular materials to reimagine the space as a preserve both undermines its history, showing beauty emerging from awfulness, and celebrates the park. It uses its context to become part of the art.

The issue of context comes up in another work, but accounts for its abject failure: *Buried House*. The idea, in the abstract, sounds good — take a house scheduled for demolition and bury it onsite. Fascinating. How will audiences interact? How will the house be transformed into an underground work? How will the artist, Lara Almarcegui, exhibit the existence of the piece?



The answers are sadly prosaic.

The house was, simply, torn down, and its pieces buried in what was once the back yard of the same property in a 18x10x6-foot ditch, then covered with dirt. That's it.

Aside from a museum marker, all you have is a pile of rubbish that you can't see or engage with to be the art. Almarcegui said she expects some people will even wonder if there really is a house there. They'd be right to — there's no evidence of it, no indicia of artistic effort: No landscaping, no before-and-after photos

or history of the house, no explanation of the process, not even a hint of chimney poking seductively from the earth like a fallen memorial to the lives lived there. It's as if she has intentionally created an archaeological dig for future generations to discover, not for current citizens to ponder actively. I could think of a dozen ways to make it work, none of which were pursued. As journalists stood next to the mound, listening to the artist explain her vision, neighbors in this clean but economically depressed Oak Cliff street sat in their yards, watching. I imagine they were all thinking what I was: That this is the kind of navelgazing conceptual piece that makes people question the value of public modern art — if they wanna see a landfill and oooh over it, I can show them my compost heap in the backyard.

Over at Paul Quinn College, artist Vicki Meek's installation *Black & Blue* is almost the opposite. A series of 15 "cultural markers" (similar to historical markers you'll see emblazoned near national monuments) that celebrate Bishop College, the historically black college which preceded PQC on the site. These panels, each about the size of a car windshield, provide interesting information and images from Bishop's past, but calling them "art" seems a stretch; they are little more than signage (there's also an online component). It's art history, not art itself. (If you haven't been to PQC, or haven't in a while, the grounds itself are lovely and worthy of a visit.)

At least Rachel Harrison *calls* her installation a sign and doesn't profess its sculptural bona fides. *Moore to the Point* is either clever meta-art or a case of the emperor's new clothes. A 20-foot tall pink arrow that hovers over *The Dallas Piece*, a vertebral sculpture from Henry Moore that the

Nasher already owned and which sits on the plaza outside City Hall. Harrison felt Moore's work — massive, engaging, organic — was underappreciated by Dallasites. Since there was a piece of public art that was already going unrecognized, her idea not to start anew but to point it out, literally: Erect a showpiece to tower over it, saying, in essence, "Do you see what you've been missing?!?"

In some ways, the piece itself is a criticism of Nasher XChange — why create new art when there's so much already out there? (In that sense, it conjures the BIG signs and Pegasus sculptures already sprinkled around the city.) But in another way, it's Harrison giving credence of the concept overall: Find art, wherever you are, and enrich your life for it.

Ultimately, that's what Nasher XChange does, and why even its misses make it a hit.

The 10-plus day launch of Nasher XChange runs through October, including a bus tour on Oct. 27. For more information, visit NasherSculptureCenter.org.

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Comments