

# Go! ART

## Roland Brener's big art idea

Victoria show offers glimpse of massive project destined for installation in Toronto

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**W**earing a gray sweater, indigo shirt, faded black jeans and a smile, sculptor Roland Brener opens the door to his amazing house. It's as if he is opening the door on his mind.

In the living room, a larger than life Buddha-businessman ("my distorted day trader") hangs from a swing, while on the floor are two giant heads of a wolf and cat, with jaws interlocked. On the outer edge of a formal white chair stand a perfectly proportioned tiny man and an even tinier boy. They gaze at a giant breast that protrudes from the back of the chair, with a nipple that looks like a delicious candy.

Downstairs is a sculpture called Desk Job, that features two curving wooden chairs and a tabletop decorated with a child-size garden scene. "I did this for those people who are always complaining about their desk jobs. They're always whining about having carpal tunnel, or sore eyes," he said with a grin.

Brener's art is fascinating, amusing, bold, sometimes futuristic, theatrical, and instantly appealing, as the Victoria public will soon find out when a show featuring his recent \$500,000 commission opens at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria on Saturday.

Three years ago Brener was commissioned by the developers of Radio City, in Toronto, to build a piece of art for a plaza there, between two enormous towers. He came up with Radioville, a miniature city of 34 units.

It is being previewed here until April 3, along with several moquettes created by Mowry Baden, who was commissioned to create a piece for the new Save-on-Foods Memorial Centre. The joint show, called Thirty Years in Victoria, is part one of a two-part exhibition that will highlight more of their sculptures next year.

"I'm very excited to share this work with my home town community before it is permanently installed in Toronto," said the hazel eyed, goateed Brener who looks wiry and fit at 63. The pieces are about 1.2 metres in diameter, and one or two storeys high.

"It's a frighteningly huge project," said the South African-born sculptor, who became an artist because he couldn't do anything else. "I couldn't pass school, I was a troubled youth."

Always modelling rather than doing homework, he lived in a fantasy world until he joined the Israeli army as a paratrooper. He managed to get out a few years later with his knees and, most importantly, his hands intact, and went to London to study with the legendary sculptor Anthony Caro, at St. Martins School of Art.

His career took off. He was asked to stay and teach for four years, then moved to the States, but was enticed to UVic by artist Don Harvey. While teaching here for 30 years he represented Canada at the Venice Biennale, the Sao Paulo Biennial and participated in numerous other international exhibitions.



Radioville, a miniature city under construction at Keating Industrial Park, is destined to grace a Toronto plaza development. Roland Brener photo

"I came for the sailing," admits Brener, who has cruised with his wife all over the Pacific and Caribbean in his 50-foot sailboat. That's one of the reasons he started developing art on a laptop, because he could do it at sea. He is now spending more time ashore, and is working with his hands again.

He explains that Radioville derives from two previous works — Capital Z and Endsville — done in 1993 and 1997. Capital Z, now in the National Gallery collection, is based on Monopoly type houses and hotels, made of cardboard. It even includes a slum.

Endsville resembles a mini city too, and incorporates computer generated sound and light activated by the viewer's presence. "It was designed by me on the computer and built in cardboard by a team of volunteers," before it travelled to Portland, Toronto and Tokyo.

Because the Radioville pieces will be outdoors, they were made of brushed stainless steel by Specific Mechanical in Keating Industrial Park. "All the commission money was spent here, and I was fortunate to lock in the price three years ago, when the project started to take shape. Prices have jumped through the roof since then."

He hopes the shiny, solid little buildings will be sat on, jumped on, and perhaps even danced on by students of the nearby National Ballet School, in Toronto, although here that may not be possible.

"There is a huge volume of material and I'm used to having lots of space, but I won't here," says Brener who has long been fascinated by the Miniature World tourist attraction here. He's absorbed by the idea of projecting the imagination into small

spaces, "by the suspension of disbelief."

He's never had a commission before, nor ever applied for one, and "was up against some serious competition for this, but the judges' panel got it right away. They liked the way it occupied the plaza and was so friendly to people. A lot of sculptures are OK until they are placed in an environment and then they're dwarfed. Looking down on these will be like looking at alphabet soup."

Each piece weighs up to 500 pounds and the gallery was worried initially that the floor might collapse, but contemporary art curator Lisa Baldissera says the load is no greater than a busy opening, according to engineers.

She adds the exhibition is a fascinating exploration of the two artists' sculptural influence locally.

"This is Roland's first public art commission and it's major: one of the most significant recent commissions in Canada. It's serendipitous that both have public commissions just now."

She adds Brener's utopian vision is elevated by his choice of materials, and the clean lines. "We all seem to be fascinated by the miniature, that's why we have dollhouses."

Both sculptors came to the city in the 1970s and influenced a whole generation of young artists through their teaching in the University of Victoria, she says. Nationally and internationally prominent, they have continued a vital practice in Victoria.

Mowry Baden's exhibition features maquettes and drawings of previous works, with video documentation of some of his public art projects. Victoria filmmaker Grace Salez's short film reveals his public art practice, said Baldissera.



Sculptor Roland Brener stands beside one of his smaller scale projects.

Darren Stone/Times Colonist