

Houston sculptor had money to burn for this Asia Society show

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"Joss" is the title work of Joseph Havel's sculpture show at Asia Society Texas Center.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist / Courtesy of the artist

Molly Glentzer August 25, 2020 Updated: August 25, 2020, 3:52 pm

Joseph Havel has burned through some spirit money this year.

More specifically, he has been making “Joss,” a new series of bronzes formed from paper material that debuts Aug. 29 at Asia Society Texas Center. While the show can be viewed in person, in the Center’s entry hall, Havel will give an online talk and studio tour at 2 p.m. Saturday.

Curator Bridget Bray invited Havel to respond to “Eternal Offerings: Chinese Ritual Bronzes,” a show of ancient treasures in the Center’s main gallery, because those physically brawny but light-spirited pieces are not just ancient history to him. They are part of his own story as an artist.

Havel first encountered the Minneapolis Institute of Arts’ collection of ritual bronzes decades ago as a student at the Univ. of Minnesota. They became a significant influence.

Today, Havel is renowned for sculpting poetic forms that evoke ephemerality and permanence, consumption and preservation. He has stacked books and cast them in resin. Pieced together clothes and fixed them with wax. Covered walls with thousands of individually-pinned, custom-made shirt labels.

But nothing sticks around like bronze, and Havel’s bronzes have a sense of flow that can make them seem weightless in spite of themselves. The folds of “fabric” in his monumental bronze “Curtain,” a piece familiar to anyone who has entered the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston’s Beck Building from Main Street, look like they could waft in a breeze.

‘Joss’

When: 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays, Aug. 29-Nov. 8

Where: Asia Society Texas Center, 1370 Southmore

Details: Free; 713-496-9901, asiasociety.org

Catching up: [Joseph Havel’s blue period](#)

“Joss” adds a new chapter, building on the sculptor’s own history of poetic transformation borne from fragile materials. The show features 10 sculptures, including 1993’s “Pollen,” cast from a pair of paper umbrellas. The other nine are new, and half of them respond to “Eternal Offerings.”

In Asian cultures, people traditionally burn joss paper as an offering to ancestors, with the idea that the smoke carries its value into the spirit world. Contemporary joss paper crafts can be elaborate, replicating not just money but other necessities of life such as clothing, food, jewelry, phones and flat screen TVs.

Havel used some of those contemporary forms to build his sculptures. A few look like they were made with shoes. Another looks like a stack of broken-up boxes. As they were cast in bronze, the paper burned out.

We are told that Havel’s parrot, Hannah, collaborated on some of the new works. Let’s hope she participates in Saturday’s web talk to explain.

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Molly Glentzer

Molly Glentzer, a staff arts critic since 1998, writes mostly about dance and visual arts but can go anywhere a good story leads. Through covering public art in parks, she developed a beat focused on Houston's emergence as one of the nation's leading "green renaissance" cities.

During about 30 years as a journalist Molly has also written for periodicals, including Texas Monthly, Saveur, Food & Wine, Dance Magazine and Dance International. She collaborated with her husband, photographer Don Glentzer, to create "Pink Ladies & Crimson Gents: Portraits and Legends of 50 Roses" (2008, Clarkson Potter), a book about the human culture behind rose horticulture. This explains the occasional gardening story byline and her broken fingernails.

A Texas native, Molly grew up in Houston and has lived not too far away in the bucolic town of Brenham since 2012.