

THE ART OF BEER

Conversation Pieces

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More so than wine, spirits or any other drink (alcoholic or otherwise), beer is a social beverage. People like to get together over a pint. And the pint itself, if it's the right one, acts as a social lubricant. The right pint for social lubrication is a session pint. Session beers are full of flavor, always inviting the drinker to consume more, but are delicate in constitution, so that the consumption of several pints over a long session at the pub does not end in a drunken blur.

While I like big beers and while big beers can be social in the sense that they are a pleasure to share and to talk about, they tend to be the topic of conversation rather than enhancing conversation about other topics. On the other hand, session beers enhance conversation, without having to be the subject of the conversation.

To me, there is no better session beer than English bitter. Ranging in alcohol content from 3% to 5% for an ordinary or regular bitter, these beers have a nice maltiness and a pleasant English-hop character. They have a quality that invites the drinker to have another. They are not sipping beers; they are drinking beers. A low level of carbonation allows for consumption of the beer in volume, without being filling or bloating. Classic commercial examples include Fuller's Chiswick Bitter, Young's Bitter and Adnam's Bitter.

There is no such thing as session art. Art, unlike beer, only enhances conversation to the extent that it is the subject of conversation. Still, the way session beer can enhance conversation brings to mind the sculptures of Spanish artist Juan Muñoz (1953-2001). Rather than creating art that provoked conversation, he created art about conversation.

Beginning in 1990, Muñoz

created a number of sculptures, each entitled "Conversation Piece". Public Conversation Pieces can be seen in New York City at Doris C. Freedman Plaza (Fifth Avenue and 60th Street); in Washington, D.C. at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (part of the Smithsonian Institute at Independence Avenue and Seventh Street SW); as well as many other places throughout the world.

Conversation Pieces involve monochromatic (typically grey) bronze sculptures of several men, from a few to dozens. The men are virtually identical, have round bottoms (like a punching bag), have odd facial expressions and are posed in groups. It appears as if the sculptures are having conversations, from which we have been excluded. Everything is frozen in time and the gray color of the sculptures make them look like the frozen victims of Mount Vesuvius in Pompeii.

The sculptures are animate enough to draw us in, but have an eerie quality to them, which pushes us away, emotionally if not physically. The men seem to be having a good time, so we want to be part of the conversation. But what if they are having a laugh at our expense? Suddenly, we are pushed away from the conversation.

Munoz himself said that much of his work "is dependent on the interaction between the viewer and the pieces." Walking in and among the pieces, the viewer of these works is encouraged to join the conversation, but since the sculptures aren't saying anything, the only thing left to talk about is conversation itself. The result is a conversation about conversation.

As art critic Narcelle Doe put it, viewing a Muñoz piece "may reduce you to silence, but you will be talking about it for days afterward." Grab a pint of bitter. I'd love to hear what you have to say.