



BIG FLOWERS FOR A WILD CITY

Martin Basher

The Collin Post 4 Plinths Project



wellington sculpture trust

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When Martin Basher was a child growing up in Wellington, he didn't have much exposure to art. But the sculpture installations along the water near what is now the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa, tugged at his curiosity. "I found them really interesting because they seemed to not have a use," he remembers. "They were strange and mysterious."

As a young adult, Basher pursued the trail of this mystery across the globe to New York City. He studied art at Columbia University and built a decades-long career for himself as a painter of dazzling, acid-colored abstractions, and a builder of enigmatic sculptural installations that were in dialogue with the work of contemporaries like Banks Violette and Carol Bove. Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic locked the world down, he and his family moved back to Wellington.

Basher's commission for the Collin Post 4 Plinths Project, entitled "*Big Flowers for a Wild City*", is therefore a homecoming in more ways than one. As his first large-scale sculptural installation in his hometown, it serves as a bold announcement of his return to the art scene. But the project is also a throwback to the start of his artistic journey.

For each of the four plinths in the plaza Basher has designed a towering, abstract bouquet of candy-colored flowers, arranged in a vase. These works originated in a turn that Basher's practice took in 2020, as the pandemic raged. Amid the chaos, he realized that he "needed to make something pure and beautiful." The resulting floral still lifes, which were initially rendered on canvas and cardboard, were, for Basher, a kind of "escape into aesthetic pleasure." However, the bouquets were double-edged. "Flowers are gifts of love," Basher observed, "but also gifts of loss."

This ambivalence is characteristic of his work more broadly. His earlier sculptural work, for instance, engaged with the aesthetics of retail display and product design, probing both the seductive and repellent aspects of contemporary capitalism and the louche masculinity that it sells.



His paintings, which often featured jazzy op-art stripe patterns and lurid color gradients, are eye-catching on the one hand and sickly sweet on the other.

The dual function of "*Big Flowers for a Wild City*" as both celebration and memorial is mirrored in civic monuments like Jeff Koons's 2019 sculpture "*Bouquet of Tulips*", which was created as a tribute to the victims of the 2015 terror attacks in Paris, or Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's massive "*Dropped Bouquet*", the duo's final collaborative work, conceived before van Bruggen's death from cancer in 2009. Basher's flowers, which grew out of the pandemic, reference that tragedy, and the hope of renewal in its aftermath. But they also point to a larger calamity looming on our horizon.

Basher's gigantic floral arrangements, which are artificial, imperishable, and rendered in screaming, alien color, gesture towards an upset in the natural order, even as they pay homage to nature's bounty. This is no coincidence. Basher and his wife, the filmmaker and climate communication expert Martha Jeffries, have long been committed to the fight against climate change, and the disquiet that lurks beneath the surface of these cheery bouquets has its roots in this struggle. Despite these darker undertones, Basher ultimately wants these works to be received as lasting tokens of affection.

Their generosity, embodied in their vibrancy and their plainspoken formal exuberance, should be seen as tribute to both the city of Wellington and to the power of art itself. Perhaps, he hopes, some young person might see these works and get hooked by the mystery of art, just as he was.

-Artist and critic Chris Wiley is a regular contributor to The New Yorker and Aperture magazines. He lives in New York.

The Wellington Sculpture Trust

The Wellington Sculpture Trust was established in 1983 to enrich Wellington through sculpture and public art.

The Trust commissions contemporary public sculptures of the highest quality, supports the creative arts in New Zealand and gives artists the opportunity to make large scale public works. The objective is also to make this art form publicly accessible to as large an audience as possible, and increase knowledge of New Zealand contemporary artists working in this art form.

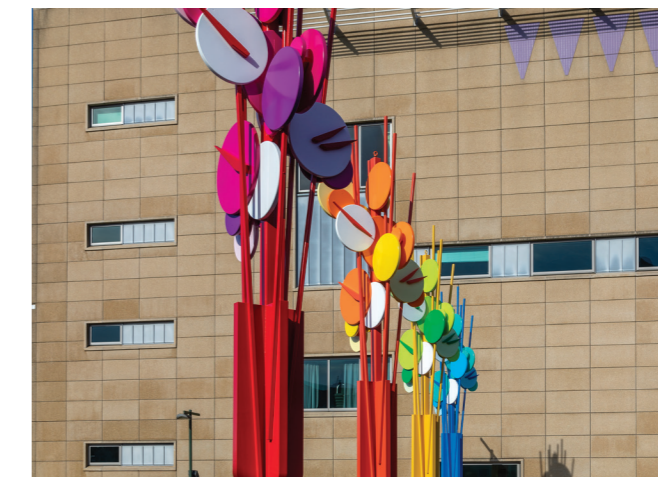
To this end the Trust has commissioned 31 permanent sculptures around the City and the Botanic Gardens over the past 42 years.

The Trust is an independent voluntary organisation, with an established expertise in commissioning public art. It works in partnership with the Wellington City Council and other parties and raises the funds for the commissioned works through the generous donations of individuals and Wellington businesses.

Wellington Sculpture Trust trustees: Jane Black (chair), Nick Barratt-Boyes (deputy chair), Sue Elliott, Ruth Harley, Helen Kedgley, Julian Ludbrook, Paul Diamond, Ross Steele and Mark Hutchins-Pond.

The Artist Martin Basher

Martin Basher is a NZ/US artist based in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. Working across a range of media, his practice explores the relationship between nature and culture, always with a focus on beautiful surface and form. Born in Wellington, Basher spent several decades living and working in New York City, where he exhibited internationally. He returned to Wellington in the early 2020s. *Big Flowers for a Wild City* marks a significant new chapter in his practice and reflects his renewed connection to the city where he began his career.



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The 4 Plinths Sculpture Award

The Wellington Sculpture Trust, with the Collin Post 4 Plinths Project, has made a departure from permanent to temporary public art. In 2006 the Trust saw the possibility presented by the four bollards sitting between the forecourt of Te Papa and Wellington's waterfront. Here it showcases New Zealand sculptural practice with biennial sculpture installations. The aim of the project is to foster art, artists and audience interactions, and to provide an opportunity for established and emerging artists to work in the area of large-scale public sculpture. The Trust acknowledges with warm appreciation the Post family who provide the \$50,000 award, and the support from the Wellington City Council, as well as Seresin Wines and ParrotDog beer.

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