

Fine Balance

(A Site-Specific Sculpture for Water Street in Petaluma, California)

by Brian Goggin

As one approaches Water Street, mysterious figures are visible in the distance. A curious image of five Victorian claw and ball tubs, 17 feet high on thin stilts, amble along the waterfront plaza area. Their presence suggests that something unusual is happening here. This is not a typical suburban town.

While the artwork is open to interpretation by the viewer, several attributes of the site and its history influenced this concept. The use of the antique tub form provides a link to Petaluma's Victorian roots and preservationist efforts that have maintained the town's distinctive architectural character. During the California Gold Rush, this site on the Petaluma River served as a vital shipping hub with San Francisco. As an intersection of commerce, the river transported local produce, poultry and dairy from Petaluma to San Francisco. In exchange, manufactured goods and household items, including claw and ball bathtubs, were received from San Francisco and supplied to the growing community. Many claw and ball tubs procured from this trade activity are still in use at many local residences. Claiming dual status as both a relic from the past and an enduring functional object in the present, the claw and ball bathtub can be seen as symbol of timelessness. Here, a familiar quotidian object is presented in an atypical context, seemingly in contradiction to its conventional role. Yet, the intended action of these vessels involves filling and draining with water is akin to the daily tidal movements of the river. The parade of claw and ball tubs is a celebratory response to the reawakening of this site that the city once turned away from. The tub forms delicately balancing on stilts are a physical expression of the sensitive manner in which Petaluma navigates the path forward, while maintaining its treasured heritage, agricultural roots and eclecticism.

During the day the sculptures will create images and shadows on the sidewalk and nearby buildings offering depth and contrast to the composition. At dusk, the silhouettes will be limned by the transition from day to night. At night, the work will be illuminated by solar powered LEDs. Each tub will have a dedicated uplight that will illuminate the tub while reducing wasteful side light pollution. Each uplight will be powered by a low voltage power supply with an integrated photocell to ease with automation.

Fabrication Method:

We will use salvaged Victorian claw and ball tubs, ideally collected from Petaluma residents. The work will be fabricated in Brian Goggin's San Francisco studio and delivered to Petaluma by boat for installation. We will engage the San Francisco Maritime Museum to determine the viability of using the Alma, an original sailing scow that used to make the journey regularly to and from Petaluma with goods from SF. The transportation of the artwork using the once active trade route between Petaluma and San Francisco offers a physical connection to the past and present context of the site.

Degenkolb Engineers will collaborate with Goggin to realize the visually precarious effect of heavy tubs balancing on thin stilts, both possible and safe, using cutting-edge, durable materials such as carbon fiber and stainless steel. The stilts will be painted to evoke the look and texture of wood. We will use cranes to lift the sculptures to their positions on the waterfront plaza. The sculptures will be fastened to the plaza slab using methods specified by Degenkolb Engineers, who have worked on complex projects with Goggin for over 20 years. The LED lights will be installed in the concrete slab and connected to local power.