

Sculptor has feet on the ground

Chelsea Shover

Standing five metres tall and looking as though it is about to run off, Walking East, a sculpture made of thick, painted corten steel sheets, sticks out like a sore thumb in the congested industrial landscape of Kwun Tong. But its creator Paul-Alexandre Bourieau says this is where the work belongs.

'[It's] a sculpture in the street, for the street,' says the 40-year-old French artist of his latest Hong Kong piece, commissioned by a commercial property developer.

He adds that, at ground level, nothing comes between his sculpture and its audience - the public. 'I don't like this 'sacredisation' of art. I'm nothing more and nothing less than a baker,' he says. 'I want to give art to people every day.'

Bourieau specialises in integrating his projects with their environment. His other works in Hong Kong include Earth Dragon in a large shopping mall in Kowloon and smaller pieces for hotels.

Though based in Italy, Bourieau spends a lot of time in Hong Kong these days. That is partly because there is a smaller demand for corporate art in Europe. The artist decided not to take the gallery route, which relies heavily on dealers selling his works, opting instead to work with corporate clients.

Bourieau is quick to point out there is a general misconception that this restricts creative freedom. 'I have never experienced a corporation who interfered with my design,' he says. 'I've never had someone say, 'Oh no, you change this form, you don't do that.'"

Bourieau is also intrigued by the way Hongkongers receive public art. In Europe, public opinion follows art critics, he says: 'It's almost a shame to be happy or to say something nice to someone else.' Also, an unprotected sculpture in, say, London would soon be covered in graffiti. 'Here, they will not dare.'

When Bourieau works on his public sculptures in Hong Kong, passers-by often congratulate him or give him the thumbs-up. However, frank appraisal is not always positive. 'When [people] don't like it they tell you. I really enjoy this brutal honesty.'

Bourieau started designing for Hong Kong clients in 2004 after participating in an exhibition in Taiwan the previous year. Although he speaks very basic Cantonese, he says location and language matter less than a common mindset.

'I find less difficulty in communicating with a Chinese sculptor than with an art critic,' he says with a laugh. 'The technique of carving is ancestral and the same all over the planet. You need this craziness ... this really primitive attitude to sculpt a block of granite in our time.'

Bourieau's next Hong Kong piece will be for a residential complex this autumn to be followed by another sculptural project in Guangzhou next spring.