

Toronto public-art project made of 1.6 million sticks strives for visibility

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Two Circles, created by Micah Lexier, is part of The City of Toronto's Percent for Public Art Program.

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If artist Micah Lexier gets his wish, Torontonians looking for a convenient downtown landmark will start saying to each other "Meet you at the black circle."

The orb in question is part of *Two Circles*, Lexier's new public-art project for the eastern tower of the Bay-Adelaide Centre, the newly opened second phase of a financial-district office complex. Lexier won a competition to design the work created under the Toronto Percent for Public Art program that requires private developers to offer public art in their public spaces.

Called on to imagine something for the transparent lobby of soaring glass walls, Lexier pondered how to animate a highly visible space that can be seen by drivers hurrying along Adelaide, one of the busiest one-way streets in the city.

"The challenge was to make a work that could be seen driving by, but that would also work up-close. That was the task I set myself," the Canadian artist said in a recent interview.

"The building [designed by KPMB Architects] was perfect, monumental. It just needed one more simple element in that space."

Lexier, whose work often plays with abstract shapes, signs and symbols, chose to impose two gigantic circles on either side of the lobby, one all black, the other a black ring.

The two black-and-white circles contrast boldly with the rectangular building, and with *Straight Flush*, the art work in the western tower created by the American artist James Turrell and featuring five rectangular light panels that gradually change colour.

But Lexier was not just going to paint a circle on white drywall. Experimenting with various possibilities alongside his collaborator and assistant on the project, creative director Lisa Naftolin, he decided the wall would be a mosaic.

"I never work with the same material twice," he said. "It's a pain, but it gives the work an incredible energy because you are solving a problem."

In this case, he engaged the Montreal studio Mosaika to create hundreds of thousands of small ceramic sticks – each one a bit bigger than a matchstick – glazed either black or white. It took about 30 people a year to make the tiny tiles. Each stick was then snapped in two before it was placed in the massive mosaic that features 1.6 million separate pieces.

The breaks in the sticks form a wavy line running across the mosaic, like the output of a heart monitor or a stock-market graph, so that up-close the inquisitive passerby can discern a delicate pattern in the tiles.

So, the work can be experienced as a mighty landmark or as an intimate game; it is a testament to labour – thousands of hours of it, all by hand – and a public-art metaphor for the public itself, the crowd made up of thousands of individuals.

"I am one of those sticks," Lexier said.

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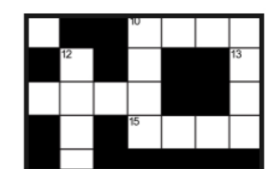
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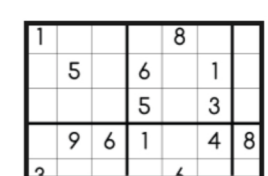
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