

ENTERTAINMENT

Black Tiberinus is coming to the Chicago Riverwalk

By MORGAN SMITH
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The Black Tiberinus art piece by Chicago based artist Robert Burnier, on display along the Riverwalk in Chicago, Monday, July 16, 2018. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

If you're strolling along the Chicago Riverwalk this summer, you'll notice a vibrant new colossus guarding the Lake Street drawbridge.

"Black Tibernius," a massive, three-piece installation will add color to the Riverwalk, as well as break up the monotony of riverfront eateries and boat stops. The work, by Chicago artist Robert Burnier, is part of an initiative by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE).

Nathan Mason, a curator of Exhibits and Public Art for DCASE, says the process to select the Riverwalk's latest exhibition took "months." He contacted Burnier, a School of the Art Institute of Chicago alum whose work has been featured in galleries in Chicago, New York, France and Denmark, to name a few, in January to create the installation.

The exhibition setup also faced many obstacles presented by city ordinances and building codes. Burnier says he changed the structure of the artwork numerous times and worked with an engineer to meet all of the city's height, width and safety requirements.

A city ordinance required the structure to be sturdy enough to withstand windy conditions, so Burnier replaced his original idea for a lighter framework with steel beams that better supported the canopy.

The work, cheekily titled "Black Tiberinus" after the the Roman god of the Tiber river Tiberinus, will be on display from August until May. The three pieces are three stories, half a story and one story tall, respectively. Burnier's piece consists of three geometric structures made of nylon, mesh and rope, supported by tall steel beams. One of the structures' nylon canopies will hang over Upper Wacker Drive like a mystical hand — the hand of a god.

But why a Roman god? Burnier says he was inspired by the similarities between Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, recognized as the first permanent resident of Chicago, and Tiberinus. Du Sable, he says, is "the god of the Chicago River, just as Tiberinus guards the Tiber."

Burnier found inspiration in Chicago's present, too. He says the first completed structure, a mustard-yellow behemoth, was inspired by the yellow coloring of municipal buildings and construction equipment around Chicago. But the translucence of the sheer nylon and its sensitivity to light allow for fun shadow play, depending on the time of day.

Mason noticed this effect while he and Burnier were setting the work up on Monday. "In the morning the view from Wacker Drive has great shadows, he says. "But at dusk, the light shifting across the piece gives Monet's Rouen Cathedral series a run for its money."

Burnier noticed that the mid-morning light streaming between 333 Wacker Dr. and its neighbor creates a thin spotlight on the piece that extends to the river behind it. For the best viewing experience, Burnier encourages people to view the art during this time of day — and perhaps brushing up on your Roman mythology.