

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The Boston Globe

### Chris Burden's lampposts illuminate the Rose

Geoff Edgers



*Chris Burden's "Light of Reason" installation at the Rose Art Museum features 24 Victorian-era lampposts in three rows.*

The artist Chris Burden has never shied away from the shocking or obsessive, whether being nailed to a Volkswagen or crafting miniature landscapes with thousands of plastic figures.

But his latest work, a \$2 million installation for the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, merely requires the flick of a switch to come to life.

"Light of Reason" features 24 Victorian-era lampposts lined up in three rows. Concrete benches will be poured around their bases. The piece is so inoffensive that some might wonder whether it is art at all. Rose director Chris Bedford calls "Light of Reason" a "social sculpture."

Burden himself isn't looking to make any dramatic pronouncements. He hopes the piece will point people toward the Rose.

"It would be sort of a place to sit, read a book, chat with a friend, or eat a sandwich," he said in a phone interview from his Los Angeles studio.

"Light of Reason" won't be formally unveiled until September, but anyone walking by the Rose Art Museum now can get a sneak peek.

Burden's assistants have just finished installing the lampposts on what once was an unexceptional patch of grass.

For Bedford, “Light of Reason” is more than a commission. It is a statement: The Rose isn’t just open for business — the previous Brandeis administration infamously tried to shutter the museum in 2009 — but is reaching out from its galleries.

He notes that he could have used the museum’s available budget on something more conventional; The Rose’s prized collection of 20th-century art, for example, lacks a work by Cy Twombly. Bedford said he also could have commissioned a more traditional sculpture, but sought something different.

“I don’t want just an inert object looked at on a pedestal,” he said. “I wanted an object that was an icon, more like a social sculpture. Something that would be a platform for activity and a place for meeting.”

He’ll have to wait to see whether that happens — school’s out for the summer. But it’s hard to imagine the students not noticing Burden’s creation when they return to Waltham in late August.

“My favorite thing now is driving into campus,” said Caitlin Julia Rubin, the Rose’s curatorial assistant, on a recent morning as she stood near the lampposts. “You come up the hill and can see them. I circle around sometimes.”

As she watched, Burden’s assistants did their finishing work. They were touching up the gray paint and screwing on the glass shades. The three-person crew arrived on campus July 7. They were set to complete their work July 25.

“At this point,” admitted crew chief Joel Searles, “I’m pretty much ready for it to be over.”

The metal posts are not reproductions. They were mounted on Los Angeles streets in the early part of the 20th century before being taken down and put in storage.

Burden acquired them from the city and hauled them to his studio.

That’s when the tedious process of restoring them began, said Liza McLaughlin, one of Burden’s assistants.

“They’re completely covered in paint that’s flaking off,” she said. “The first thing you have to do before it goes to the sandblaster is find every joint and take it apart. Before you paint anything, you have to make sure there’s no rust. It’s almost become one piece because it’s so rusted together.”

After being sandblasted, the posts are covered in a zinc compound, and then the glossy, gray epoxy that gives them their restored shine.

Next, the heavy lifting.

“Just to roll it over and see the finish on one side, you need two guys and a machine,” said Searles, noting that each lamp weighs about 1,800 pounds. “They’re hard to deal with.”

The Rose piece is much smaller than Burden's other work to feature the antiques. In 2008, Burden installed 202 street lamps outside the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. That piece was called "Urban Light."

That's where Bedford saw them. Not long after being hired by the Rose in 2012, he began talking with Burden about a commission. The artist said he knew about the 2009 controversy surrounding the museum, but that his piece isn't a reference to it.

"If anything, those troubles are, in a certain sense, what enabled this to take place," said Burden. "Because of those troubles, that's how Chris Bedford got hired. And if he hadn't gotten hired, and been given a mandate to bring up the visibility of the Rose, I don't think I would have been commissioned to execute a new major lamp installation at the Rose."

Brandeis University president Fred Lawrence also said "Light of Reason" is not about the Rose's challenges in recent years. He believes the museum has moved past that.

"I like the idea of it being a piece of art that has a major impact on the entire campus, not just those who come into the museum," he said. "This is clearly the most significant acquisition we've made, a major statement."