

Architecture, Landscape, and Design Report
Modesto Play Sculpture
Protecting a Valuable Cultural, Historic, and Economic Asset

Submitted 16 January 2017 by Bob Barzan, architecture curator, Modesto Art Museum
Reviewed by Barrett Lipomi, AIA, president Modesto Art Museum



Summary

Object: Play sculpture

Title: Unknown

Creator/Designer/Artist: probably Charles Robert (Bob) Winston

Company: Probably Play Sculptures Division of Creative Playthings Inc.

Date: c. 1960

Style or Period: Mid 20th century modern, Modernist

Location/Site: Beard Brook Park, Morton Boulevard, Modesto, California

Status: Vulnerable site, no longer used by children, park is closed

Condition: Basically good. In need of some repair and paint

Dimensions: Measurements are approximate, 80 inches tall, 25 feet long, and 12 feet wide

Color: Original color unknown, now white

Material: Concrete over a metal frame

History

The play sculpture has been in Beard Brook Park, also known as the Modesto Children's Park on Morton Boulevard since 1960¹. It is an example of playground equipment that was promoted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York², designed by noteworthy sculptors in the 1950s and 1960s, and built by Creative Playthings, Inc. I have not yet been able to find documentation for the artist but the Modesto play sculpture greatly resembles one designed by Charles Robert (Bob) Winston in Oakland (see photo below). I think it is likely Winston designed this one too.

Bob Winston (1915-2003), a well known sculptor and jewelry designer, worked for the Play Sculptures division of Creative Playthings Inc. He was one of several prominent artists and architects employed by Creative Playthings. Others were Isamu Noguchi, Henry Moore, Louis Kahn, E. Moller Nielson, and A. Vitali³. They thought that abstract sculptures were excellent for playground equipment because they allowed for creative imagining on the part of the children. Winston's first play sculpture was featured in the California Spring Garden Show in 1952⁴.



Children on first play sculpture designed by Bob Winston, Oakland, California, 1950s
Note similarity to Modesto's play sculpture. The overall structure, design, and materials are nearly identical, as are the details of the small foot steps, the extended arms and platforms, and rounded smooth finish.

¹ Children's Park Is Popular Spot, *The Modesto Bee*, Sunday, October 21, 1962, page C-1

² Pursell, Carroll, *From Playgrounds to Play Station: The Interaction of Technology and Play*, 2015, pages 44-48

³ Solomon, Susan G., *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space*, 2005, page 27

⁴ See https://localwiki.org/oakland/%22Mid-Century_Monster%22_sculpture



Play sculpture in Modesto Children's Park in the 1960s

Historical/Cultural Significance

The Modesto play sculpture was part of the original configuration of the Modesto Children's Park in 1960. The park was the idea of the Exchange Club of Modesto and planning began in 1958. The funding for all the equipment and landscaping was privately raised by the non-profit Children's Park Inc. Dozens of individuals, 69 businesses, and 41 community organizations contributed. In the early 1960s, as many as 6,784 people a month used the park⁵.

The piece is a desirable and unusual part of Modesto's mid 20th century collection of buildings, landscapes, and structures. It is already well known that Modesto was a lab for the development of the architectural style called Modesto Modernism or Central Valley Modernism⁶. This play sculpture demonstrates that the residents of Modesto also embraced innovative Modernist playground equipment and design.

Restored and in a more accessible location, the piece will contribute to Modesto's growing national reputation as an architecture and design destination. Few examples of this type of modernist play sculptures remain anywhere. I was able to locate only one other by Winston, and it is in poor condition in Oakland, California⁷. Because of its place in the history of Modernist design and its rarity, the Modesto play sculpture is valuable in its own right as an artistic and historic piece, and as a part of Modesto's collection of tourism assets.

Recommendation

The Modesto Art Museum recommends the play sculpture be restored for continued use by children. The museum recommends the current location be made safe and accessible or the play sculpture be moved to another site. One good site would be in downtown Modesto near other mid 20th century structures to facilitate visits by tourists. Other sites are possible. The museum also recommends that an inventory of city parks and properties be made to identify additional noteworthy pieces of mid 20th century playground equipment.

⁵ Children's Park Is Popular Spot, *The Modesto Bee*, Sunday, October 21, 1962, page C-1

⁶ *Modesto Modernism*, Modesto Art Museum, 2012

⁷ See <http://www.oaklandmomma.com/2016/11/18/plea-resurrect-mid-century-monster/>



Testimonial Letters from Experts

The Modesto Art Museum received the following emails and letters regarding the Modesto play sculpture from recognized professionals and experts in the fields of 20th century design, landscape architecture, and historic landscape.

Email from Alan Hess, AIA:

Architect and historian Alan Hess is the architecture critic of the San Jose Mercury News. He has written nineteen books on Modern architecture and urbanism in the mid-twentieth century. Hess is the preeminent authority on Modern architecture and urbanism in the mid-twentieth century.

More background on Alan Hess here

<https://www.laconservancy.org/presidents-award-alan-hess>

Dear Bob,

Yes, this is something to retain. It is a part of a trend in midcentury playgrounds, and you are absolutely correct in the relationship to Noguchi etc. It happens that I played on Winston's Lake Merritt sculpture as a kid — it probably started my awareness of Modern design!

Part of the spread of Modernism after World War II was the effort to bring Modern design to improve all aspects of everyday life in use by the general public: furniture, household appliances, tableware, fashion, autos, architecture, etc. One aspect of this was to improve playground equipment for children that was fun, functional, and could spark their imaginations. By combining the abstract forms of Modern art with the tactile play experiences of climbing, sliding, jumping, and (most important) imagining, these sculptures made art a part of daily life. Though widespread (especially in California), few of these remain today. I encourage Modesto to restore and retain its example of this trend.

Alan



Email from Sarah Allaback, Managing Editor, Library of American Landscape History, Amherst, Massachusetts. Sarah has a PhD, in architectural history and theory from MIT and is a nationally recognized expert in modernist park structures.

Dear Bob,

The Robert Winston play sculpture in Modesto is an example of mid-century modernist design worthy of preservation. Artists like Winston, Isamu Noguchi, and the landscape architect Robert Royston, created new forms of abstract playground equipment in the 1950s that not only inspired creative play, but also captured the spirit of the era. The Library of American Landscape History urges you to restore and preserve this structure, a rare example of the mid-century effort to re-invent the American playground.

Best,

Sarah

Email from Lee Davis, Co-Director of the Center for Social Design and Faculty in the Masters of Social Design at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore, the oldest college of art and design in the nation:

Dear Bob,

The mid-century modern “Monster” play sculpture you have uncovered in Modesto is an absolute gem!

There are few examples that remain of Robert Winston’s large installations. I’m quite familiar with the similar play sculpture in Oakland on Lake Merritt. A local community group has been very active in organizing a “Lake Merritt’s Mid-Century Monster Fan Club” and, along with the City, raising funds to preserve it and the surrounding park on the picturesque lakefront.

If the City of Modesto is unable or unwilling to preserve, repair and prominently display the play sculpture there, I could imagine a lot of other cities wanting it as a tourist attraction for art, design and landscape enthusiasts!

As you may already be aware, according to the most recent Otis Report on the Creative Economy of California, design-led industries and tourism created 1.6 million jobs in our state (more than New York and Texas combined), representing nearly \$375 billion dollars in economic activity, and generating \$15.5 billion in tax revenues for the state. A vibrant creative economy that elevates and values design creates employment, attracts and retains top talent, generates tourism and cultural attractions, and improves overall economic development and quality of life in a city. Simply put: design artifacts like this one that celebrates the rich heritage



of mid-century modernism in Modesto will create economic value in addition to providing an iconic play sculpture for children.

I wish you all the best in your efforts to protect this important and unique asset. What an opportunity!

Warm regards,
Lee

From Kelly Comras, landscape architect and landscape historian in southern California:

Bob,

The City of Modesto has a splendid opportunity to preserve one of its distinctive public features. The Robert Winston Play Sculpture, a very fine example of modern, post-War sculpture, occupies the present public realm at a time when Modesto is gaining prominence in the nationwide embrace of the value of our cultural landscapes. Every effort to maintain, preserve, refurbish, and celebrate these civic treasures becomes an accolade for Modesto's wisdom and far-sightedness."

Kelly Comras

Landscape Architect, ASLA, RLA CA #3238
Founding Member of the Stewardship Council, The Cultural Landscape Foundation