



A young Detroiter enjoys Juan Martinez' Pangolin bike. (Doug Coombe/826 Michigan photo)



***Why Detroit needs Juan
Martinez's whimsical art more
than ever***



by *Louis Aguilar*

June 24, 2021 3:49 pm

For me, things won't be normal again until I see this funky guy named Juan pedalling down a Detroit street on a bicycle shaped like a giant anteater.

The bike is a shiny aluminum contraption with a long snout and a tail moving side to side. You can see Juan's curly black hair above the scaly middle part and his feet spinning near the legs of the animal, which is meant to be a pangolin.

Based on experience, here's what happens when Detroiters see artist Juan Martinez in his creation. Cars stop in the middle of the road, and people will jump out and be like, *"Yo, man, what you ridin'?"*

Children flock to him as if he's an ice cream truck. Even jaded hipsters laugh and whip out camera phones.

Then, most people will hang out and chat. Complete strangers. Simply gathering, sharing a friendly moment on a random Motor City street, as Juan lets people ride his crazy bike. In fact, these spontaneous moments are why Martinez spent hours creating a bike shaped like an endangered mammal. He's also produced Detroit bikes that resemble a bison and a rhinoceros.

“I love talking to strangers,” Martinez said. “When things like that happen, I feel like this is the role I’m supposed to have in society.”

I can’t think of a more apt time to celebrate whimsical creators like Martinez. So much of his art is meant to be touched, or ridden with joy, or spark impromptu connections. And this week, we get to do that again.

It’s been 15 months since we first started to isolate ourselves to fend off the lethal coronavirus. More than 2,200 Detroiters have died. Beyond COVID, many things seemed bent on dividing us and making us fear each other. Big things like politics and media, and small things like half the posts I read on Nextdoor.

I’m hoping Martinez and his creations can help us connect again.

‘Public art can be a celebration’

The bikes weld Martinez’s ideas of public art and community outreach. The 44-year-old describes himself as a “kinetic metal sculptor.” He was born in Colombia and raised in New Orleans. At age 14, a fellow Colombiano named Luis Colmenares, a New Orleans artist, introduced Martinez to the world of metal work. The spirit of New Orleans, with its world-renown street festivals and parades, is imbued in Martinez’s work.

“New Orleans really shaped my idea of how public art can be a celebration – a real hands on, participatory kind of thing,” he said.

Later, he honed his craft of metal-fabricating by studying with renowned copper artisans in Santa Clara del Cobre in the Mexican state of Michoacan. People in that region have been working with copper before the Spainards arrived in the 16th Century.

Martinez is also an illustrator and grassroots organizer. He helped co-found the artist collective Beehive Design Collective and the Austin Bike Zoo.

He’s a Detroiter by choice. He began visiting the Motor City in the early 2000s through the Allied Media Conference, an annual summer gathering of progressives from across the U.S.

“It was the most inspiring revolutionary thing in my life. I met some of the most amazing people doing grassroots community work,” he said. Many still remain friends.

He briefly had a full-time job at an advertising firm in New York City. “It wasn’t my thing,” Martinez said. He chose the life of a freelance artist in Detroit, and has lived here for more than a decade.

“Detroit’s got this New Orleans vibe with a Michigan work ethic. That really works for me,” he said. “Plus, I’ve always felt appreciated here, and that’s big for any artist.”

‘Detroiters haven’t lost their sense of awe and wonder’

In 2016, he was commissioned by the writer Dave Eggers, who also runs a literary project called 826Michigan, to produce a series of “animal bikes.” Thus, the pangolin and other bikes were born — all part of a series called “The Spirit of the Animals is in the Wheels.” The bikes have been exhibited at The Biennial of the Americas, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), The Henry Ford, Atlanta Contemporary Art Museum, Georgia Tech, Outside Lands, Ann Arbor Street Fair and the Toledo Art Walk.

In Detroit, he’s taken the bikes to the annual Eastern Market After Dark and events on the Avenue of Fashion. In 2017, he was awarded a Kresge Artist Fellowship, an annual prize in Metro Detroit that’s in recognition of an artist’s body of work. The fellowship comes with \$25,000.

Beyond the bikes, he’s received commissions from Henry Ford Health System. At the ArtBlock project in the Northwest Goldberg neighborhood near Henry Ford’s Detroit campus, Martinez produced an outdoor work that features the heads of two hippopotamuses next to a pair of small houses. The houses resemble pieces from the board game Monopoly. It’s the artist’s jab at gentrification.

“There’s a game metaphor with hungry hippos playing Monopoly, which speaks to what’s happening all over the city. A lot of people have gobbled up big swaths of the town,” he said.

Yet, the work, with the hippo heads made of aluminum and on wheels, is playful and meant to be touched.

Last year, he produced a large mobile sculpture for the lobby of the new Brigitte Harris Cancer Pavilion at the Henry Ford Cancer Institute. The mobile sculpture of birds hangs from the ceiling in a room filled with art intended to comfort people dealing with mortal issues.

Now that most official social restrictions are over, Juan is ready to hit Detroit streets again with his bikes, hoping to spark spontaneous moments of connectedness among strangers.

“Detroiters haven’t lost their sense of awe and wonder,” he said. “Just cruising a Detroit street and seeing the kind of joy that I can help facilitate. That’s the best.”

Martinez will soon take his bikes to Scripps Park, 3660 Trumbull St., at an event sponsored by the nonprofit Woodbridge Neighborhood Development. For more details, or, if you wish to contact the artist for future events, contact him at bikecity@gmail.com. You can also follow him on Instagram [@juankixote](https://www.instagram.com/juankixote).