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Big blue alien says ‘welcome home’

Sculptures outside Redpath Condos provoke thoughts on what it's like to be a newcomer

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

In the past couple of months, there's been a sharp increase in reported sightings of coyotes, deer and other wildlife invading city streets. But in front of the Redpath Condos complex near Yonge Street and Eglinton Avenue, another kind of creature has been unleashed on the Midtown neighbourhood.

Two alien creatures face each other across the dense, residential Redpath Avenue, marking each of two new condo towers at 150 and 155: one on the west side and one on the east. A battle-scarred 4.5-metre-tall alien holds court on the west side, covered in mottled crayon-yellow ectoplasm, grounded firmly on its six spiderish legs. The 3.5-metre east-side alien is blue — from blowing its own horn. It's wearing some kind of pumpkin helmet and the face on its monkeyish, bug-eyed tail appears to be pursing its lips in response to a call or song.

This friendly invasion arrives courtesy of Anna Passakas and Radoslaw Kudlinski, best known as the Toronto-based artist collaboration Blue Republic. The \$15-million Stargate project, commissioned by Capital Developments, is the couple's largest public-art installation to date and their first permanent piece in Toronto.

Kudlinski says the initial idea for the project, which they won through a competition, was derived from the question: What is it like to be in a new neighbourhood? How does it feel to move into your first home?

"We were thinking about the future inhabitants," he says. "Also, what kind of story or narrative could be universal?"

Blue Republic, who have been working together since 1990, are known for thought-provoking and often playful artworks that examine our relationship to objects and places. Space travel provided an accessible theme here, offering not just an opportunity for a pop of colour on the street, but for pop-culture references that would be familiar to a wide strata of people.

"We had complete freedom, which is rare in public art, because usually it's a commission of something particular, like a



KHRISTEL STECHER PHOTOS

Stargate Blue is one of two "alien" installations by the collaborative artists known as Blue Republic now on permanent exhibition.



The artists behind Blue Republic have been working together since 1990. This installation is called Stargate Yellow.

portrayal of someone," says Passakas. "We're also very lucky to end up with a client who was incredibly enthusiastic and supportive of our work."

Behind the fun, joyful surface and the theatricality of the science-fiction theme, Passakas and Kudlinski are conveying another message with their Stargate installation, one that hits close to home for the two artists, who immigrated to Canada from Poland separately

more than 25 years ago.

"Who are the real aliens in our world today? They are the newcomers, immigrants, refugees, people coming from other places," says Passakas. "Do we make people feel welcome? The theme then became more about diversity. As immigrants ourselves, the idea is meaningful to us."

Kudlinski — who describes the layers of meaning behind the installation as similar to

strings on an instrument — makes a parallel to his own experiences, comparing the Stargate portal to his Polish accent.

"When I open my mouth, you know right away that I came from another space. I feel welcome here, but when I've failed, which has been many times, I feel like one of these characters with six legs — not really belonging and trying to lose extra legs to become like everyone else," he says. "Suddenly our mainstream sci-fi fantasy is mixing a much more serious subject than being from somewhere else to trying to find a home, trying to learn the idioms and just to belong here."

The two massive aliens are accompanied by five humanized white aluminum cut-out minions. Upon closer inspection, the figures — painted in thick primary-coloured lines reminiscent of Keith Haring's frenetic pop art — are filled with recognizable objects, such as a light bulb, a fez hat and a key for a windup toy.

On this particular Friday night, the scene attracts little attention from some locals out

walking dogs or heading up to the busy Eglinton stretch. But then one couple stops for a selfie. A group of eight arrives minutes later to take a series of family photos, moving as a group in tandem between the aluminum cut-outs until one small child impatiently guides them toward the "giant yellow octopus."

Kudlinski and Passakas recommend visiting their aliens at different times of day to fully appreciate another celestial part of Stargate: behind the sculptures, there is a wall of glass on each of the condo-tower lobbies, printed with a transparent chromatic screen of kinetic shapes and colours that brings to mind the spaceship rising in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." (The view from inside the lobby during the evening is particularly striking.)

"The fun of this piece — and many other works that we have done — is about moving among the sculptures and just walking around them," says Passakas. "That's how you absorb it, too, without thinking about it."

Hollywood looking toward 'game changer' tech

Virtual production may be useful technique during pandemic times

JOHN CARUCCI
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK—New LED video wall technology used in making last year's "The Lion King" and "The Mandalorian" series could become more widespread as Hollywood production ramps back up during the pandemic.

Instead of shooting on location with a full cast and crew, and navigating stringent social distancing requirements, it allows filmmakers on a studio lot to spread out individual scenes captured virtually using a variety of techniques.

Unlike a traditional "green screen," the actor can see the background and cinematographers can match perspectives and camera parallax to look like a location shoot.

"The Lion King" visual effects supervisor Robert Legato calls the video wall and move toward virtual production a "game changer" that's being embraced by necessity during the pandemic.

"It is something that was going to happen anyway. It just



DISNEY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LED video wall technology used in making last year's "The Lion King" could become more widespread as Hollywood looks to avoid shooting on location because of the pandemic.

would have taken longer because there would be no need for it immediately. Some people, you know, are stuck in their ways," the three-time Oscar winner said.

More than half of "The Mandalorian" scenes were filmed with the technology. Emmy-winning visual effects specialist Sam Nicholson says it represents a "natural evolution" in the Hollywood effects world, where new technologies have been embraced after past crises — including a clampdown on travel after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"We started taking shows like

'E.R., 'Grey's Anatomy' and 'Walking Dead' and saying, 'Look, we don't have to be on location to actually shoot there.' It's easier to bring the location to the production than the production of a location," Nicholson said.

He believes the pandemic will move Hollywood "from the Cecil B. DeMille era where 'everything is real' and going to more of a George Lucas era."

"If you're a producer, can you really afford to have your entire crew and actors go and be quarantined for two weeks before you start shooting?" he said.

Film production is just one of

many industries that have had to adapt so people can go back to work in person.

The "Avatar" sequels that recently resumed filming in New Zealand are also using virtual camera systems.

"We've been helping the 'Avatar' folks for a while," said Dave Hoffman of Blackmagic, an Australian company that makes cameras and video production hardware.

Director Thea Sharrock had to rely on virtual production to finish her latest film, Disney's "The One and Only Ivan," and she found the process "peculiar."

"We had one extra element that we had to do with music that we had to deal with via Zoom, which was extraordinary and weird and peculiar not being in the room with people," Sharrock said.

She added: "Doing what we do is all about collaboration. It's all about being in a room with people and that's how you get the work done. That's how you push projects forward. So it's very, very peculiar."

Nicholson shares a similar feeling. While he understands these technologies can help resume production during the pandemic, he doesn't see it as a

complete substitute for returning to a normal workflow.

"It does represent a fundamental change in production toward the virtual realm where anything is possible. But by saying anything is possible, you still have to put the story up front. You still have to put the acting up front and use it as a supportive tool to put the wrapping on the story," Nicholson said.

Still, virtual production can provide a viable solution during the pandemic and perhaps become a useful production technique moving forward.

Actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who stars in the new Netflix film "Project Power," agrees: "It's about sort of finding a good pairing between the tech you're using and the story you're trying to tell," he said.

Gordon-Levitt's "Project Power" co-star Rodrigo Santoro has worked on visual effects-heavy productions including the "300" films and "Westworld." He sees others in the industry open to adapting.

"The thing with the CGI, especially now during the pandemic, (is) that it's teaching us so many lessons and so many things about how we can reinvent ourselves," Santoro said.