

**SFGATE**

## Painter tells stories behind Golden Gate Park statues

By **Sam Whiting** Published 12:59 pm, Wednesday, April 8, 2015



Artist Robert Minervini stands at a bus stop displaying his artwork "La Poeme de la Vigne (with wine grapes)", which is at various stops along Market Street in San Francisco, Calif., as seen on Tues. April 7, 2015.

The loneliest artifact from the great catastrophe of 1906 is a portico that stood its ground on Nob Hill when the mansion behind it crumbled. The colonnade was then dragged all the way out to Golden Gate Park, where it sits by a lake.

Called "Portals of the Past," it is out of context, so painter **Robert Minervini** decided to give it one. He put the portico



on canvas backdropped by the mansion it fell off of, and that painting is now bus-shelter art on Market Street, not far from Lotta's Fountain, which gets all the glory.

“Portals of the Past’ is the only existing monument to people who died in the earthquake by people who were there,” says Minervini, who researched the mansion, which belonged to railroad man Alban Nelson Towne (his widow donated the portico). Then Minervini got hooked on a theme, as artists will, and now there are six statues from the park in a poster series along Market Street.

### **Visual arts boom**

The florid Minervini paintings are part of a visual arts renaissance on Market Street that has nothing to do with the long-awaited **Mid-Market** arts district. There are brilliant murals painted by renegades on construction fences and security grates, and this weekend, there will be 52 art installations lining the street to form the Market Street Prototyping Festival.

Minervini’s posters, six sets of six, are up through May as part of the Art on **Market Street Poster Series**, sponsored by the **San Francisco Arts Commission**. It comes up with a theme and invites proposals. In this case, the theme was to portray works within the Civic Art Collection, and that’s what pulled Minervini into Golden Gate Park.

“If we go to the park, we see these statues but don’t think too much about them,” he says. “so I thought it would be interesting to dive into the stories behind the statuary.”

He picked the ones with a past, starting with “Portals,” which was first made into a photograph by Arnold Genthe. Shot from the home site on California Street, looking south, the columns framed City Hall, far down the hill in the smoldering ruins.

The portico “became famous, then the wife donated it to the city as a memorial to the people who died in the earthquake,” says Minervini, who is 33 and lives in Oakland.

### **A rare woman**

Another backstory he brought forward involves the Sarah B. Cooper Memorial. “It’s one of the few pieces that depicts a woman,” he says. “Most of them are dead white guys — poets, presidents, etc.” But the Cooper statue doesn’t depict a woman, either. He had to add her image into the painting.

Cooper was a teacher and introduced the concept of kindergarten to the West. There is a school on Russian Hill named after her, and that is in the background of her painting.

“I thought I could do more justice than a deteriorating sculpture that doesn’t even picture her face,” he says.

His painting of park creator **John McLaren** has the street grid of the park in the background. Minervini’s research indicates that McLaren never wanted a statue, and he is standing there staring down at a pine cone, with the same body language as a man staring at his cell phone.

Another modern touch is in “The Ball Thrower,” which depicts a baseball player in his windup. The statue was cast in 1884, but in the background, outlined in white, is the unmistakable flying saucer shape of Candlestick Park, soon to be demolished and in need of a park statue of its own.

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**Invisible Reflections: A Narrative of Six Monuments:** Through May 29. Muni bus shelters on Market Street between the Embarcadero and Eighth Street. To watch a short video, go to [www.sfgate.com/entertainment/item/Park-Statues-on-Market-Street-38574.php](http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/item/Park-Statues-on-Market-Street-38574.php).

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