

Response by Christabel Wiebe

*Four Flowers* is a mobile sculpture by Winnipeg artist Michael Dumontier. His work has achieved international recognition, combining conceptual art (art that centres on an idea or concept) with a handcrafted aesthetic. Many of his sculptures require you to look twice, creating illusions through the use of light, shadows, and various forms of movement.

Mobiles and kinetic forms of sculpture emerged as an art form in the early-to-mid-1900s. They involve the use of motion, and were pioneered by artists like Vladimir Tatlin, Bruno Munari, Alexander Calder, and Ruth Asawa. Until this time, sculptural artworks were generally static and heavy, and represented something, like a historical figure or an animal. Artists eventually began to create works that were abstract, and to bring abstraction to life through movement. More recent artists working with kinetics and mobiles include Sarah Sze and Tim Hawkinson. Since you're in a library, you can look up any of these artists to learn more about them. Their works range from small, delicate, and analogue, to vast, digitized installations. The sculptures can be made of anything, suspended from anywhere, and viewed from many different perspectives.

Dumontier's *Four Flowers* continues this investigation of balance, movement, volume, and materials. His flowers, which naturally imply fragility and impermanence, are actually fashioned from aluminum, brass, and steel. A counterbalancing weight is thrust in their midst, undisguised among the blossoms. The weight reveals another aspect of this form of sculpture and Dumontier's art practice in general: the deliberate exposure of the mechanics of things, which then become part of the artwork itself. The bolts that lock materials down are exposed; fasteners like washers and grommets serve a dual purpose of holding things together, while acting as the pistils or centres of the flowers.

As you stand alongside this outsized vase of flowers, you might be surprised to notice the flowers sometimes gently rotate or sway. This movement occurs when the sculpture is propelled into motion by an external force: a shake, a nudge, or even just an air current. To create a sculpture like this, an artist requires skill, imagination, and an understanding of engineering and physics. Artists sometimes need to know a little of all these things, which also might surprise you. The vase, cast in concrete, has two functions: to contain the flowers, but also to create a visual continuum with one of the building's structural pillars. From outside, the vase appears to extend right through the

floor and anchor the building to the earth below. Lying on the ground and resting against the exterior section of the vase is a single, dropped blossom. In this way, the sculpture exists both inside and outside the building—its final surprise.

Like many public artworks by the American sculptor Claes Oldenburg, Dumontier's flowers are exaggerated in scale. This magnifies their basic qualities, lending them a little otherworldliness and encouraging us to consider them anew. Floating in this glass box of a room, the flowers seem in need of protection when the elements are harsh, and act as an extension/reflection of the exterior landscape when frost gives way to the embrace of spring. Although the materials appear indestructible, the lone, dangling stem that has already lost its bloom dispels this idea. This blossom, resting underneath the building and made from weathering steel, is exposed to the elements and starting to rust. Dumontier has referred to his interest in Japanese flower arranging as an influence on *Four Flowers*, and the qualities embodied by that artform: "The art of Japanese flower arrangement stresses the imperfect: a simplicity and roughness that gives way to tenderness."

In a sense, a handful of cut flowers, loosely gathered, form a community. They speak a silent language, and invite your interaction as they gently nod, shake, and sway. They commune with each other, but also with you. You can talk to them, and they may nod in agreement or tremble in shock; they are responsive that way. They, too, will live life within whatever confines are presented—soil, vase, a small and slightly sweaty palm. They will thrive for a while and be beautiful in their way, and they will die. That is the natural way of things; that is life. But in this moment, we can ask ourselves: "What is their fragrance?" "Why do they beckon?" "Are they haunted by the one that has already gone?" "Do they laugh sometimes?" "How long am I welcome in their midst?"

Because I feel very welcome, and hopefully you do, too.