Marilyn attracts smiles, scorn and skirt chasers
Towering statue generates wide range of reactions
By Rex W. Huppke
July 24, 2011

The Marilyn Monroe that now stands tall on Michigan Avenue, her head high enough to see passing boats on the Chicago River, is fortunate to be all aluminum and stainless steel, unable to read the nasty things being written about her. Since rising up this month in Pioneer Court, she has been called "creepy schlock" and "a giant, silent avatar of nonconsent." Some are appalled at the seemingly endless stream of tourists hugging her legs and voyeurs young and old unabashedly shooting upskirt photos on their iPhones.

But outside the local blogosphere, among the crowds that encircle the city's latest piece of public art, there are smiles and laughter and a general sense that the statue is neat and harmless, and certainly not something you see every day.

"I think it's terrific," said Joe Guerra, who now lives in Missouri but used to work in the Equitable Building just behind the statue. "And I think it's terrific that some people are troubled by it. Art should always elicit some kind of reaction, whether it's positive or negative."

Members of the group that owns the sculpture by J. Seward Johnson Jr. concur, and are delighted that Marilyn has caused a stir.

"It is a positive thing, it absolutely is," said Paula Stoeke, director of The Sculpture Foundation, based in Los Angeles and Princeton, N.J. "Public art is all about creating a dialogue. When you can get people talking, in particular if they're not saying the same thing to one another and they have differing views, that's an exciting thing. That's something that people who are interested in placing public art are happy to see happen."

Stoeke said Johnson, who also sculpted the 25-foot-tall "American Gothic"-inspired piece that went up in the same spot in 2009, was not available for interviews because of recent surgery. But, in a statement sent via Stoeke, Seward made clear that he wants people to "easily come close and actually touch" the statue.

"There is something about her pose; the exuberance for life without inhibition, which is quintessentially American. It expresses an uninhibited sense of our own vibrancy," Seward said in the statement.

Bren Ortega Murphy, an associate professor at Loyola University Chicago's School of Communication and an expert in gender construction and mass media, views the statue as out of place in Chicago and fears it's sending a negative message about women being nothing more than sex symbols.
"This is disturbing to me," she said. "It's not that feminists don't have a sense of humor or any sense of aesthetic. But there are whole bachelor parties taking their pictures underneath her. All the shots are underneath her."

That much is undoubtedly true. More than an hour of late-morning observation revealed a near-constant stream of people either staring up Marilyn's skirt at her white underwear or aiming a camera in that general direction.

Part of the problem, Murphy said, is that it's hard to imagine anyone putting up a provocative male statue: "Tom Cruise when he comes out (in the movie 'Risky Business') wearing no shirt and his underwear. That's an iconic figure too, but would we do that? I don't think so."

Jessica Reynolds, 21, a senior at Loyola who routinely walks by the statue, said she's more concerned with how the towering Marilyn makes the city look.

"Chicago is swarmed with tourists in the summertime, and I'm sure they appreciate it," Reynolds said. "It's like going to Vegas, but for everyday Chicagoans passing by, it seems kind of trashy. You have this pinup girl whose skirt is blowing up in the wind. It just doesn't really fit in Chicago."

But for every person who views Marilyn as a pink flamingo in Chicago's front yard, there seem to be several more who think she's fun to have around.

Donald Allen, 81, of Evanston was on Michigan Avenue for a business meeting at the Wrigley Building. Post-meeting, he came to visit the statue.

"I decided to come down, have my engagement and then touch Marilyn's toe," Allen said, moments after the toe-touching.

He shrugged his shoulders at critics of the piece: "Some people are not really happy with a lot of things. You can't please all of the people all of the time."

Hannah Higgins, an associate professor of art history at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said she'd describe the Marilyn statue as "art in the direction of billboards and kitsch and films — it has no edifying value."

"It certainly has a right to exist," she said. "The contrast would be something like The Bean (formally known as Cloud Gate), that would be the counter to it. I think The Bean can cause people to look at a lot of things differently, including the crowds and each other and the city they live in."

Higgins said the experience people have with Marilyn should not be over-analyzed — it simply is what it is: "What I wouldn't want to do is make up a bunch of phony-baloney theories that turn it into a transformative experience. My kids would certainly run up to it and take a picture up the skirt. I'd put the experience right up there with their cartoons and the kind of kitsch in kid movies."
Paul Zeller, president and CEO of Zeller Realty Group, which curates Pioneer Court, said his hope — part of the motivation behind bringing Marilyn here — is that the statue harks back to a simpler time.

"I find the adults are almost uniform in their reaction," Zeller said. "They look at it and they sort of get a smile. That smile's reminiscent of a lot of things that happened years before. People think back on where they were as a kid when Marilyn Monroe was a figure in entertainment. It brings us back to a time when we felt more positive, more optimistic. Maybe we were even a little nicer to each other.

"I don't see anything wrong with that."