



ARTWORK **GOLD RUSH**

ARTIST **TOM OTTERNESS**

INSTALLED 1999
ROBERT T. MATSUI U.S. COURTHOUSE
SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

For the plaza of the federal courthouse in Sacramento, Tom Otterness created a group of knee-high bronze figures drawn from the history of California's nineteenth-century Gold Rush. These miniature Native Americans, pioneers, gold prospectors, and assorted animals are all rendered in the artist's signature, cartoon-like style. The exaggerated cuteness of these smiling, bulbous characters belies their shrewd social commentary. For example, on the bench in front of the plaza's fountain, a cheerful Native American woman poses with her arm around a miner as her husband snaps their picture with his camera. This comically anachronistic scene subtly recasts the miner as the exotic outsider, in a reversal of so many Hollywood cowboys-and-Indians movies. At one end of the fountain, two prospectors pan for gold. They are aided by a salmon that carries a gold nugget in his mouth and another in his hands. Uncle Sam inspects their glittering treasure with keen interest. At the opposite end of the fountain, a Native American fisherman spears a leaping salmon, which curiously sports a small derby and shoes. Here, it's a large bear that watches covetously. Another dapper salmon waddles along the plaza toward some bags of money. A pair of majestic eagles flank either end of the fountain, each with an unlucky fish in its talons. Across the plaza, a pipe-smoking pioneer woman drives a covered wagon—pulled by an ox wearing little boots—as two squabbling children nearly tumble from the back. Otterness has compared this group to its modern counterpart: "It's the classic cross-country station wagon trip we all took as kids." From a nearby ledge, a solitary bison surveys the scene. Because the histories of the California Gold Rush and the westward expansion of the United States are so much more complex than the harmonious caricature that Otterness presents, the work challenges viewers to reevaluate standard assumptions about American history. *wc*



Tom Otterness was born in Wichita, Kansas, in 1952. He moved to New York in 1970 to attend the Art Students League and then the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program. Otterness now lives in Brooklyn, New York. His studio is populated by the countless wax, clay, and plaster models of his unique menagerie. These figures are constantly reinvented and recombined to create his full-scale sculptures that are ultimately cast in bronze. During his first years in New York, Otterness worked as a night watchman at the American Museum of Natural History, where the elaborately staged dioramas fueled his imagination and can still be sensed in his own complex sculpture installations for city parks, subway stations, hospitals, universities, libraries, government buildings, and museums. His three other GSA commissions are: *The New World* (1991) for the Edward R. Roybal Federal Building in Los Angeles, California; *Law of Nature* (1997) for the Mark O. Hatfield U.S. Courthouse in Portland, Oregon; and *Rockman* (1999) for the U.S. Courthouse in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Otterness' work is also in the collections of many museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



MEDIUM BRONZE
 DIMENSIONS SEVENTEEN PIECES, VARIOUS SIZES