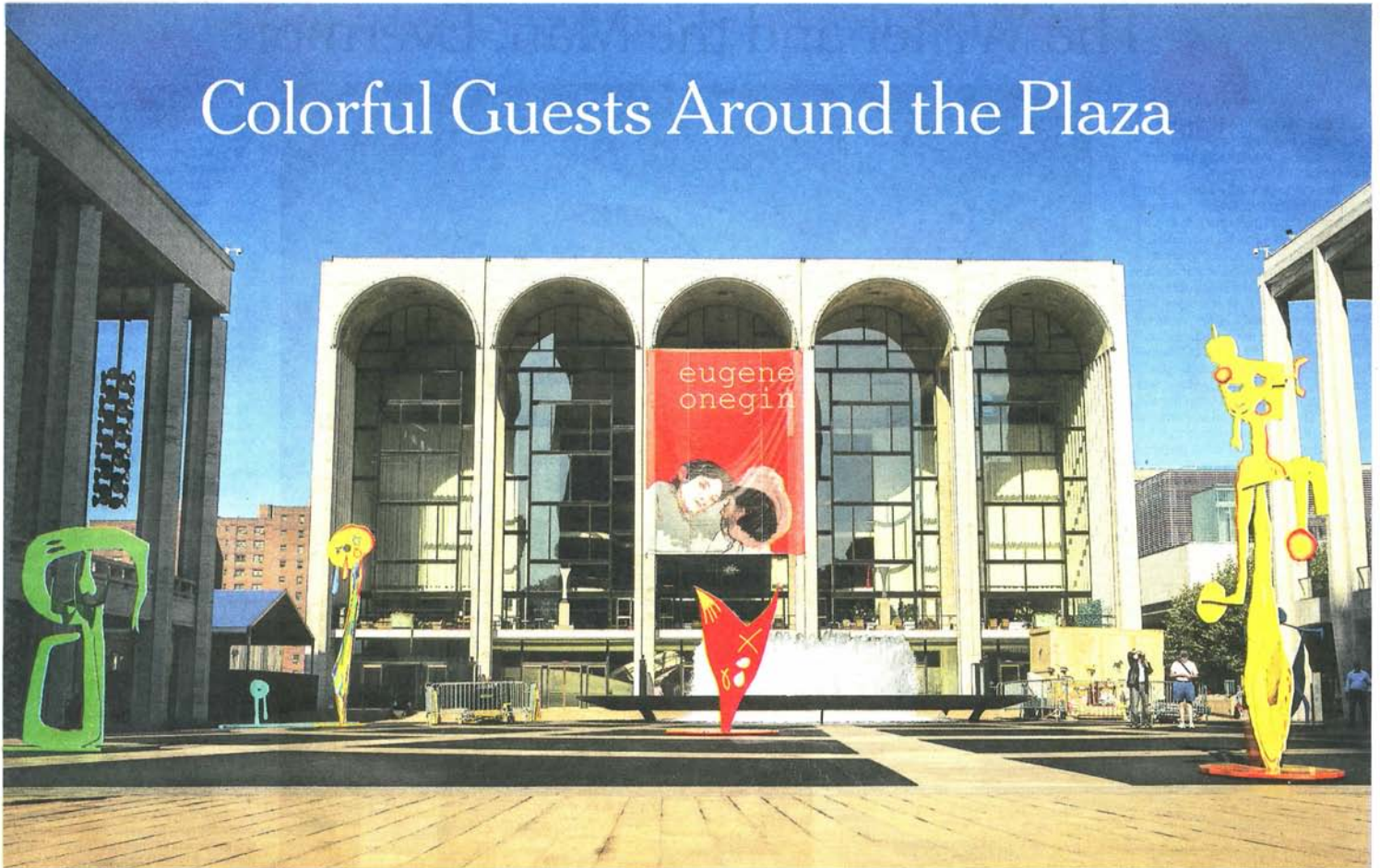


Colorful Guests Around the Plaza



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By JULIE L. BELCOVE

COMING of age in San Antonio in the 1970s and '80s, the artist Aaron Curry knew nothing about opera or ballet — or fine art, for that matter. His preferred entertainment was "Scooby-Doo" and "Jonny Quest" cartoons, "Star Trek" episodes and Iron Maiden heavy-metal music. "I grew up watching TV," he said one afternoon in the shade of Lincoln Center's leafy London plane trees. "I'd sleep with it on."

Just hours later, after the Metropolitan Opera let out, Mr. Curry began to install "Melt to Earth," his tableau of 14 ecstatically colored metal sculptures that will be scattered through Jan. 6 around Josie Robertson Plaza on the Lincoln Center campus, the city's epicenter of highbrow performance. The greatly abstracted figures form a quirky cast of characters befitting the surrounding theaters. Constructed of whip-thin panels that give the illusion of space, they also create a dramatic stage set, with passers-by becoming the players.

"I like the idea that as you walk around, it compresses and almost disappears from the side," said Mr. Curry, 41, who has a hillbilly beard and a gentle demeanor.

Nicholas Baume, the director and



chief curator of the Public Art Fund and a member of Lincoln Center's curatorial advisory group, said that Mr. Curry's work has "a musicality, a theatricality and a playfulness" against "the grand silhouettes of the modernist buildings."

Mr. Curry, who was sitting midway between sculptures by Henry Moore and Alexander Calder, said he was not

Aaron Curry, left, and some of the 14 sculptures in his installation "Melt to Earth," above, which will be on view at Lincoln Center through Jan. 6.

trying to be merely theatrical but to create a "visual language" that could give viewers a visceral experience.

Moore and Calder are among the many art-historical references in Mr. Curry's work, which meanders from Picasso to Noguchi. "I love these artists," Mr. Curry said. "I've looked at all of them excessively."

But he noted the influences of two former graduate school professors at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif.: Richard Hawkins and Mike Kelley. Mr. Kelley encouraged him to explore subcultures "and not be embarrassed by it," he said; Mr. Curry applied Mr. Hawkins's concept of collage to his own sculpture.

For "Melt to Earth," Mr. Curry, who is based in Los Angeles, applied his typical sampling-like sweep of allusions: rudimentary World War I tanks, science fiction creatures, even Giacometti's unrealized commission for Chase Manhattan Plaza. He credited Barbara Rossi, a Chicago Imagist whose class he took

while an undergraduate at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, with inspiring broad-mindedness.

"She had this routine: Every week she wanted students to come in with something that had an impact on them," Mr. Curry said. "It could be 'Gilligan's Island' or some weird billboard. It resonated with me."

He arrived at art school thanks in large part to the woman who is now his wife, Jennifer Chbeir. The middle of three sons, he was born to a teenage mother; his father, a carpenter, abandoned the family when Mr. Curry was 5. He was always drawing, and Jennifer convinced him to bring his portfolio to a local viewing that the School of the Art Institute was holding. When, a few years in, he failed to fill out some financial aid paperwork, he took six years off to work and pay a \$7,000 debt. He eventually graduated, at the age of 30.

After switching from painting to sculpture, Mr. Curry gained traction, with inclusion in important group shows as well as solo outings at the Hammer Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles; the High Museum of Art in Atlanta; and Ballroom Marfa in Texas.

After Lincoln Center approached him about a commission two years ago, Mr. Curry began brainstorming by downloading pictures of the plaza onto his

iPad, then doodling on them with a stylus. He sensed that creating a single sculpture monumental enough to command the sprawling space would be impossible. His solution, he said, was to "activate" the plaza with a series of works in heights ranging from 4 inches to 19 feet, and colors that pop against the travertine backdrop.

Mr. Curry built the plywood maquettes by hand, and it was important to him that the fabrication process not result in a super-slick piece that erased evidence of his touch, "so I don't meticulously cut," he said. "I try to cut as if I'm painting. A lot is chopped up, bad cuts." Mr. Curry, who has recently taken up painting on canvas again, left paint splatters and drips on some of the sculptures, along with his prominent "A.RRY" signature.

"Melt to Earth" is his most significant public sculpture to date, and he said that negotiating Lincoln Center's requirements has been a learning experience. He adjusted some placements so as not to cover the names of any Lincoln Center donors in the pavement. But despite some concerns, he was able to preserve his sculptures' silhouettes. "I think there could be some people getting stuck, if they want to put their heads in them," he said. "In the end," he added, sounding a bit surprised, "they were O.K. with that."