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A warrior woman with five faces and an ode to the twin towers: Two monumental acquisitions reopen the Hirshhorn's sculpture garden

By Peggy McGlone | August 12, 2020



One of two new works at the Hirshhorn's sculpture garden, "We Come in Peace" by Huma Bhabha, is seen from the rear facing the Mall. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

As if the pandemic weren't enough, an intense heat wave choked Washington last month, turning the Mall into a vast green wasteland. Displays of major new art works have been hard to come by in recent months. But even these extreme conditions couldn't stand in the way of the installation of two massive sculptures at the Hirshhorn Museum.

On July 22, a crane parked on the edge of the sunken garden lifted a 23-foot bronze candle weighing 3,600 pounds and gently flew it over blossoming myrtle trees into the garden's interior. There, the piece was bolted upright next to its twin taper. The installation of Sterling Ruby's "Double Candle" required more than a dozen museum staff and outside contractors and four hours of choreographed effort.

The day before, Huma Bhabha's "We Come in Peace," a more than 12-foot red, blue and black figure weighing 3,300 pounds, was erected at the foot of the garden's stairs, its head with five faces visible from the Mall.

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Part of Sterling Ruby’s work, “Double Candle,” passes over “We Come in Peace” by Huma Bhabha, as it is hoisted into place at the Hirshhorn. (Bill O’Leary/The Washington Post)

The works — acquired in November by the Smithsonian’s modern and contemporary art museum — are the latest notable additions to the sculpture garden, which is expected to reopen Monday — along with the Enid A. Haupt and Smithsonian gardens around the institution’s administration building — after a five-month, pandemic-related closure. The Smithsonian welcomed visitors back to the National Zoo and the National Air and Space Museum’s Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center in Virginia on July 24.

“They are kind of a teaser to the things that we have planned,” Hirshhorn Museum Director Melissa Chiu said of the new works. “These are two major acquisitions. They’re both, in scale and in intention, a way of signaling our intention toward wanting to bring the garden up to date.”

The sculptures are the first by Pakistani American Bhabha and L.A.-based artist Ruby to enter the museum’s permanent collection. They stand apart from the more than 30 works on display by artists including Auguste Rodin, Jean Arp and Judith Shea.

Bhabha’s fierce female figure, for example, responds to the many monuments to men around the city, Chiu explained. “We love this idea that she would be a sentinel that greeted people,” Chiu said. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the 2018 piece was hand-carved in cork and plastic foam before being cast in bronze. It features graffiti marks and slashes and its title references a 1951 sci-fi movie about an alien landing in D.C. Ruby’s candles — a work that evokes the twin towers and a vigil, Chiu says — are cast in bronze but suggest stuffed cloth.

“It’s really representative of how artists are thinking about new sculpture today. It doesn’t look or feel like the very finished, highly polished bronzes, nor even of the more painterly approaches like our [Willem] de Kooning or Henry Moore,” Chiu said about Bhabha’s work. “There’s a sense of monumentality, but it’s a new kind of monumentality.”

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Close-up of “We Come in Peace” by Huma Bhabha. (Bill O’Leary/The Washington Post)

The sculptures are both a draw for visitors returning this month and a harbinger of Chiu’s reimagining of the outdoor space. The museum plans to raise the below-grade garden to the same plane as the Mall, switch out the pieces on view more frequently, feature more large-scale contemporary works and create a performance space for events, Chiu explained. All of those moves are intended to increase visibility and attract new audiences.

“It’s a big part of our mission — how do we bring modern and contemporary art to visitors in an understandable way?” Chiu said. “We really think the key is the garden. If they are here on the Mall and they come in, they may find something of interest.”

The garden attracts about 100,000 people annually, only one-tenth of the museum’s visitors. Meanwhile, more than 30 million people visit the Mall every year, Chiu noted.

In early 2017, the Hirshhorn hired artist and architect Hiroshi Sugimoto to update — “revitalize” is the museum’s preferred verb — the 1½-acre garden that was originally designed by Gordon Bunshaft. It was overhauled a few years later by renowned landscape architect Lester Collins. Sugimoto also redesigned the museum lobby, which was unveiled in 2018.

Sugimoto’s concept adds a ramp from the garden’s south side and restores the underground connection to the museum plaza. It creates three distinct areas, one for performances and events, one for modern sculptures, and one for the larger works favored by contemporary artists. The design was unveiled last year and received initial support from the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts.

Since then, the museum has engaged with community leaders and historical preservationists and updated the design to reflect feedback and criticism. The nonprofit Cultural Landscape Foundation has designated the garden an “at-risk” landscape because they say the project will erase Collins’s contribution. The D.C. State Historic Preservation Office has also voiced concerns about changes to the garden’s reflecting pool and concrete walls.

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June 2020 aerial rendering of the proposed sculpture garden. (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden)

The office “has consistently maintained that Gordon Bunshaft’s reflecting pool and concrete aggregate walls — particularly the central partition wall — are the most critical elements to preserve because their materials and design visually tie the museum and sculpture garden together and identify them as a single, unified work of a master,” senior preservation officer C. Andrew Lewis wrote in a June 26 letter to the Smithsonian.

John Beardsley, who retired last year as director of garden and landscape studies at Dumbarton Oaks, described the project as “somewhere between a rehabilitation and repurposing.”

“I’m sympathetic to the idea that museum audiences are changing, art is changing and [Hirshhorn officials] want more flexible space,” Beardsley said, adding that he thinks flexibility can be achieved while maintaining the signature walls.

“My concerns are chiefly that the museum, plaza and garden are of a piece, they share the same geometries and material. I think the geometries and materials ought to remain,” he said.

A Hirshhorn curator from 1974 to 1978, Beardsley is concerned that Sugimoto’s plan will bring back the harsh conditions that plagued the original garden. Collins added vegetation and trees for shade; the new design reduces them.

“I remember the bad old days when that space first opened. It was really barren and inhospitable, boiling hot in the summer and freezing cold in the winter. It had one of the worst microclimates in the city,” Beardsley said.

Museum officials say they will continue to modify the plan in response to public feedback. A budget and construction timeline are expected within six months, when the public consultation has concluded. The project will be supported with private donations. In the meantime, officials are eager for the public to visit and enjoy the contemporary works.

“An interesting thing now with the pandemic is outdoor spaces are actually much more amenable to visitors,” Chiu said. “We’re excited to be able to open it up first, before we even get to the building.”