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The Audacity of Art at the Obama Presidential Center

Art at the Obama Center, by Mark Bradford, Jeffrey Gibson, Richard Hunt, Julie Mehretu, Hugo McCloud, Idris Khan and Alison Saar. Credit: The Richard Hunt Estate/artists Rights Society (ARS), Ny

Barack and Michelle Obama commissioned 30 artists to create work for their campus, which starts visitor previews next week on the South Side of Chicago.

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Reporting from Chicago

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Yes, there will be the more predictable elements: a full-scale model of the Oval Office, videos of election nights and mannequins wearing the first lady's dresses.

But the Obama Presidential Center, which officially opens on the South Side of Chicago in June, will also have a feature rarely — if ever — prominent in past presidential libraries: original works by 30 artists that were commissioned by Barack and Michelle Obama.

The decision to make art a priority in President Barack Obama's privately funded, \$850 million project for posterity is consistent with the Obamas' longstanding commitment to the arts over two administrations. During those terms, the first couple centered artists like Alma Thomas, whose 1966 canvas "Resurrection" was the first painting by an African



Left, the museum’s crown contains words from President Barack Obama’s remarks on the 50th anniversary of “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, Ala. Right, Julie Mehretu’s painted glass artwork, “Uprising of the Sun,” climbs the museum’s north facade.



View from the Sky Room — which features Idris Khan’s artwork in the conical ceiling — looking across at the Obama Center’s N.B.A.-size basketball court.

American woman to enter the White House Collection, along with Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sberald, who painted the Obamas' National Portrait Gallery portraits.

"Michelle and I wanted the Obama Presidential Center to be more than a library or a museum," Obama said in a statement to *The New York Times*. "We wanted it to be an important cultural institution for Chicago and the South Side, a place that belonged to the community. Art was central to that."

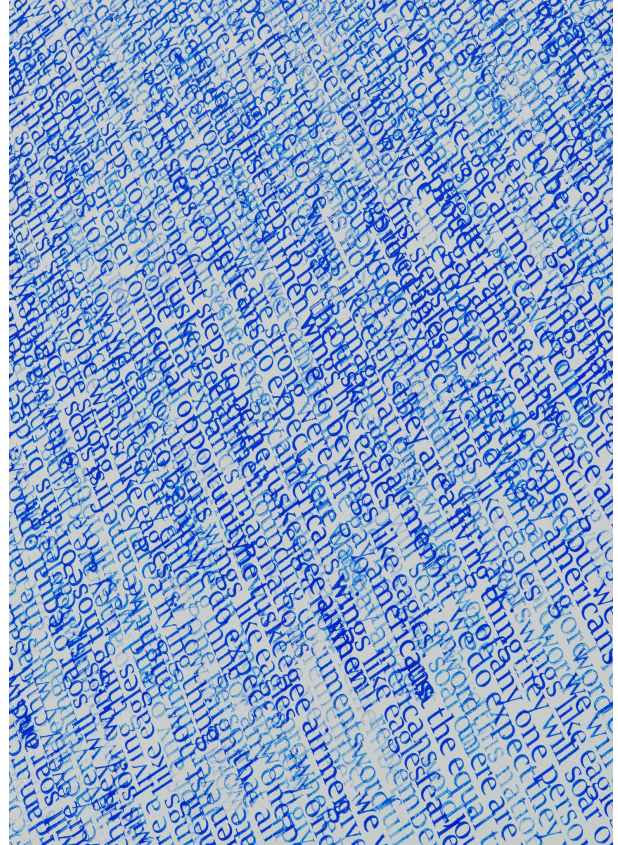
"When you commission work from artists like Richard Hunt or Julie Mehretu or any of the 28 others who contributed to this campus, you're trusting their singular vision," the statement continued. "But each of them, in their own way, is wrestling with the questions this Center is built around: where we come from, how we got here, what kind of future we can imagine for ourselves and our communities."

The art commissions are one of several unconventional aspects of the Obama Center, designed by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien Architects, which starts visitor previews on May 4. The former president decided to create a 19.3-acre campus in Chicago's historic Jackson Park that could be used by the community, rather than function traditionally as an archive.

In addition to the central obelisk (which some have nicknamed "the Obamalisk"), the complex includes a branch of the Chicago Public Library, an N.B.A.-size basketball court, a teaching kitchen, a playground, gardens and a sledding hill.



Idris Khan's installation anchors the ceiling of the museum's contemplative Sky Room.



Idris Khan's "Sky of Hope" consists of thousands of hand-stamped words referring to President Obama's Selma speech, which is also carved into the building's exterior.

"It's exactly what I think the president always wanted, which is, it's for everybody and art matters," Williams said. "Music will matter, reading will matter, play will matter."

The complex initially prompted concerns about its potential impact on the park and gentrification as well as its break with precedent. The center is run by the Obama Foundation rather than by the National Archives and Records Administration, the federal agency that has administered the libraries and museums for all presidents going back to Herbert Hoover. Obama has explained that, because his records will be digitized and available to the public online, this will democratize access.

Other presidential libraries have created elements that aimed to attract visitors, including fashion shows, interactive situation rooms and musical performances. The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Library, in Simi Valley, Calif., features a 1984 Cadillac presidential limousine in its Air Force One pavilion, which also has the Boeing 707 that served seven presidents.

For the Obama Center, Thelma Golden, an Obama Foundation trustee and the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem — along with Anita Blanchard, a Chicago physician and collector — helped develop an art plan, proposing the first six commissioned artists.

The full list of artists was assembled over time by Virginia Shore, who served for 20



Rashid Johnson's large-scale mosaic draws on his "Broken Men" series and resides in the teaching kitchen.

years as chief curator and acting director of the U.S. Department of State's Office of Art in Embassies.

"This site and this project inspired a lot of people to try new things," said Shore, pointing out how Nick Cave and Marie Watt collaborated on a large textile drapery in the museum's main lobby.

The artists include Njideka Akunyili Crosby, who has painted what is said to be the first formal portrait of the Obamas together, which will hang in the museum's main lobby; Rashid Johnson, whose large-scale mosaic draws on his "Broken Men" series and resides in the teaching kitchen; and Martin Puryear, whose cresting wave sculpture on the center's plaza was inspired by a quotation Martin Luther King Jr. popularized, about how the arc of the moral universe "bends toward justice."

"I can't think of an example where I saw this much art on display" in a presidential library, said Colleen Shogan, who served as the nation's archivist before President Trump fired her last year. "This is something they want to emphasize or how they want to tell their story."

While adult admission to the Center's museum costs \$30, much of the campus is free and the art is spread throughout. A conical ceiling in the museum's contemplative Sky Room features Idris Khan's installation composed of cascading words from the president's remarks on the 50th anniversary of "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, Ala. A bronze statue by Alison Saar, inspired by the Statue of Liberty, stands in the park's restored Women's Garden. Aliza Nisenbaum's painted mural stretches 70 feet across the Main Reading Room, depicting writers like James Baldwin, Toni Morrison and Walt Whitman.



Alison Saar's "Torch Song," a bronze statue inspired by the Statue of Liberty, stands in the park's restored Women's Garden.



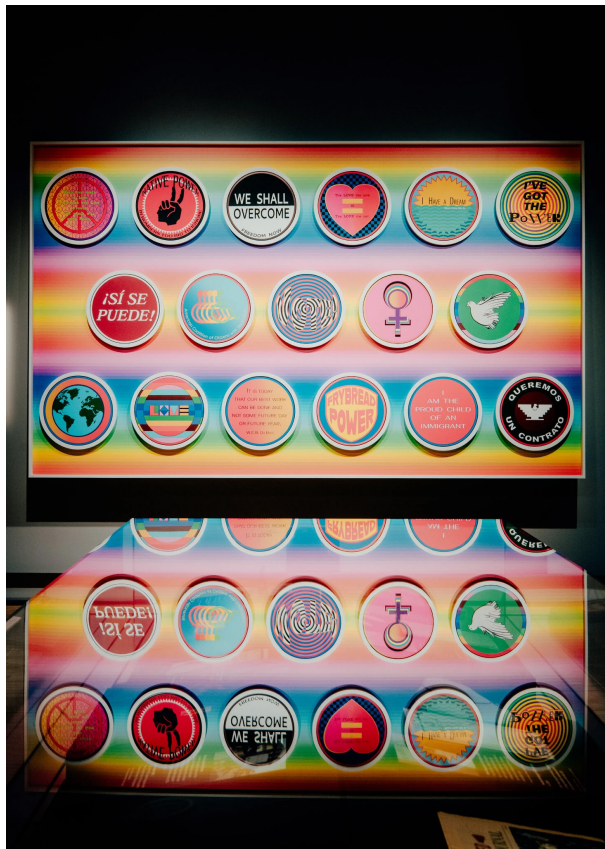
Left, Nick Cave and Marie Watt's collaboration, "This Land, Shared Sky," in the museum's main lobby. Right, Hugo McCloud's "Hidden Reflection," about the former president's personal history, in the center's private dining room.

The Obamas "wanted the arts to feel embedded," said Louise Bernard, the museum's founding director, who previously helped develop the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

The artist Lorna Simpson said Michelle Obama came for a studio visit in 2021 after seeing her 2019 show at Hauser & Wirth gallery in New York. "She had been following my work," Simpson said.

For a seminar room at the center, Simpson said, Mrs. Obama wanted a work that related to Simpson's glacial "Ice" paintings.

The Obamas' "presence in the White House was significant to me," Simpson said, "and also significant to my daughter, who grew up under that administration."



Jeffrey Gibson's "Yet With a Steady Beat" features 17 circular prints that evoke Native American hand drums and political buttons. The installation incorporates messages from social movements and pop culture.

Similarly, Jeffrey Gibson, the queer Choctaw and Cherokee artist, expressed his enthusiasm for the Obamas' spirit of "inclusivity."

Gibson's colorful wall installation, which is featured in the museum's "More Inclusive America" exhibit, includes 17 circular prints that have references to political buttons and Native American hand drums with messages like, "I've got the power" and "I am the proud child of an immigrant."

"There is a social aspect to the way that they were promoting the arts," Gibson said of the Obamas. "The canon could expand. That felt really promising."

Other commissions include a massive Mark Bradford installation in the museum atrium that maps Chicago's South Side neighborhoods; a soaring painted glass window by Julie Mehretu; and a frieze by Theaster Gates created for the Forum building, which has an auditorium, recording studios, classrooms, a cafe and offices.



Mark Bradford's "City of the Big Shoulders" anchors the museum's Our Story Atrium.

"It's a new approach and shows his sensitivity to how a presidency can be reflected in the culture," said the presidential historian Michael Beschloss. "This is a president who, from the time he began running through the length of his presidency, loved contemporary culture, spoke about it, was conversant in it and talked in a serious way with people who created it."

Working on these commissions, several of the artists said, was a way to feel more connected to Obama not just as a historical figure, but as a human being.

"I made it for Obama," said Hugo McCloud, whose painting layers maps from the president's places of origin — Indonesia, Kenya, Chicago and Hawaii — and features the homes Obama grew up in. "I wanted to imagine him thinking, 'Oh, I remember that store across the street from that apartment building where I used to get that juice.' It's not just about this huge building.

"Yes, they've had all these experiences and yes, they have had the weight of so many things on their backs," McCloud added of the Obamas. "But I do think it's little moments that still matter for these people."



Spencer Finch's "Memory Landscape (Nairobi, Chicago, Honolulu, Jakarta)," Home Court. The colors in Finch's mural installation were inspired by Obama's early years in these cities and were selected by the former president.