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The 25 Sculptures That Define the Modern Age

Four artists and a curator debate the most important works since the end of World War II.

By M.H. Miller, Phoebe Chen, Rose Courteau, Julia Halperin, Zoey Poll and Michael Snyder

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Sculpture occupies an odd place in contemporary art. Because of their sheer physical presence, sculptures are often harder to show, not to mention more difficult to sell: This fact forces the medium into a secondary role behind painting, especially in a business so obsessed with the markets. And yet, sculpture is arguably the art that the public, throughout history, has tended to interact with the most, even if we're not always paying it much attention. Sculpture is an indelible part of the global landscape. It's in our public plazas, our corporate office parks. Celebrated (and often meticulously preserved) as a form of creative expression across the world, sculpture goes back to the prehistoric age, to early peoples' use of stone flints to carve anthropomorphic figures out of mammoth ivory. Every culture since has made its own totems, sometimes to mark its triumphs and tragedies, and sometimes for reasons that are less clear.

To choose the 25 most important works of sculpture made since 1945, we asked a panel of experts to gather at the New York Times building in March. They included the artists Firelei Báez, 45; Charles Gaines, 82; Adam Pendleton, 42; and Arlene Shechet, 77 — each of whom has, to varying degrees, explored and advanced sculpture in their work — along with Ruba Katrib, 44, the chief curator of MoMA PS1 in Queens and the former curator of the nearby SculptureCenter, the only museum in New York explicitly dedicated to the medium. Any task that ends in anointing something “the most

important” is highly subjective and should be considered with a heavy dose of skepticism; a different group would have come up with different selections, and it’s easy to imagine the following list turning out differently had this same group met at a different time on the same day.



The panel, from left: Charles Gaines, Adam Pendleton, M.H. Miller, Firelei Báez, Ruba Katrib and Arlene Shechet, photographed at The New York Times offices on March 11, 2026.

But while this was an exercise with disagreement baked into its premise, as moderator I was surprised at our sheer level of divergence about what makes a sculpture significant. I was likewise (pleasantly) surprised at our ability to make compromises and concessions. Each member of the jury submitted a list of proposed inclusions before our meeting, and each had to let go of a favorite: Báez lost the battle to include Simone Leigh’s 2022 installation at the U.S. pavilion of the Venice Biennale, Katrib a passionate argument for Niki de Saint Phalle. I was disappointed at how quickly Michael Heizer’s 1969 land art masterpiece “Double Negative” was dismissed by the group. (Fans of Alberto Giacometti, John Chamberlain, Joseph Cornell, Barbara Hepworth and Elizabeth Catlett will also surely notice their absences here.) There was a good deal of back-and-forth about which Kara Walker sculpture to include; we eventually had to put the matter to a vote that never felt quite resolved. Our most heated debate revolved around Maya Lin’s Vietnam War Memorial (1982) in Washington, D.C., and whether such a work — a monument, commissioned by the U.S. government — should be considered sculpture at all. (No, we finally decided; the most important monuments should be a different list altogether, but we also had to put Lin to a vote, and then to a follow-up vote.)

Beyond that, our definition of sculpture was generally broad. We would consider works from any country, though our choices display a clearly Western (and New York-centric) bias. We would weigh not just individual three-dimensional objects but group exhibitions and works skirting the line of other media, up to and including those centered on the human body as it moves through space. In fact, one of the few things the panel seemed to agree on implicitly is that a sculpture can be anything interacting with its environment, whether that’s an enormous steel structure by Richard Serra or, in the case of the Pope.L, a video of a performance, filmed over nine years, in which the artist periodical-ly crawled along Broadway in New York City until he’d finally completed the entire 22-mile journey.

The list below is presented without ranking, but rather in the approximate order in which we talked about the works. I’m sure it will inspire some disagreements of your own. — *M.H. Miller*

Arlene Shechet: Can you go over what the question is again?

M.H. Miller: We're trying to think about the most important works of sculpture since the end of World War II. The only constraint is that they have to be made post-1945.

Shechet: I feel like we need to define whether we're choosing based on artists and their careers versus individual artworks.

Charles Gaines: There's no way in the world I can think of an individual work, because I'm thinking about the body of work that person has done.

Adam Pendleton: In focusing on specific works, I think you naturally think about the rest of the artist's work. Great works don't just drop out of the sky.

Ruba Katrib: I think a lot of the works that we're going to bring up — the ones we think are really important — may not be known by, let's say, a broader public anymore. I feel a lot of pressure.

Firelei Báez: So, are we considering a work's global impact as the main justification for deeming it "important"?

Miller: I think "important" means important to you.

Báez: So it's absolutely subjective? Oh, no!

Miller: Well, however you define "important" for yourself in this conversation is how you define it. I think we should just start with this first work that you picked, Arlene.

21. Lauren Halsey, "The Eastside of South Central Los Angeles Hieroglyph Prototype Architecture (I)," 2023



Lauren Halsey's 2023 installation on the roof of New York's Metropolitan Art Museum, "The Eastside of South Central Los Angeles Hieroglyph Prototype Architecture (I)." Amir Hamja for The New York Times

When, in 2022, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art commissioned Lauren Halsey to make a work for its rooftop, she responded with a 22-foot-tall glass-fiber reinforced-concrete installation that, much like the Temple of Dendur four floors below, evoked the grandeur of Ancient Egypt. But instead of paying homage to any pharaoh, the monument celebrated the citizens of South Central Los Angeles, the historically Black and working-class area where Halsey grew up and still lives. There were sphinxes depicting her mother and partner and four Hathor-style columns topped with busts of local artists surrounding a central tomblike structure, whose walls were engraved with text and images drawn from South Central: graffiti tags, activist slogans and signage from Black-owned businesses. Altogether, the work was an Afrofuturist vision that reimagined ancient architecture as a site of Black success. This kind of civic advocacy is central to Halsey's practice. In 2019, she founded a community center in Los Angeles, and earlier this year, an expanded version of the Met installation, "sister dreamer: lauren halsey's ode to tha surge n splurge of south central los angeles," opened in her hometown as a public park and gathering space. The artist had always intended it to end up among those it commemorates. — *P.C.*



Halsey in Los Angeles in 2026. Amanda Hakan for The New York Times

Miller: From Charles's picks, I want to single out Lauren Halsey.

Katrib: Lauren is taking sculpture to some other level.

Miller: With the Met rooftop, she connects South Central to ancient Egypt. It's like this whole history of human civilization.

Katrib: And it does feel like a distinct new generational move.

Pendleton: She's changed things I think, yeah.

Shechet: It says something if you can make something that's only three years old and have it be that influential.