

The New York Times

Artist Martin Puryear Chosen for U.S. Pavilion at Venice Biennale

By Robin Pogrebin | August 15, 2018



Martin Puryear's "Big Bling," a 40-foot-tall sculpture looming over Madison Square Park in 2016. The multitiered wood structure is wrapped in chain-link fence and anchored with a gold-leafed shackle. The timbers and plywood create a shape both animal-like and abstract. Martin Puryear, Matthew Marks Gallery; Photo: Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Like athletes who make the team at the Olympics, the selection of an artist to represent the United States at the 58th Venice Biennale next spring is a big deal in the art world. Now, at a time when museums nationwide are trying to diversify their collections and exhibitions, comes the announcement, for the second time in a row, of an African-American artist: the 77-year-old sculptor Martin Puryear.

During a 40-year career, Mr. Puryear has been acclaimed for large scale works in wood, stone and metals that display strong craft traditions and explore issues of ethnicity, culture and history. Mr. Puryear's "Shackled" (2014), for example, is a black iron sculpture with a metal hoop at the top, reminiscent of the cuffs once used aboard slave ships.

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“Martin is one of the most important artists working today,” said Brooke Kamin Rapaport, the deputy director and senior curator of the Madison Square Park Conservancy, which commissioned and will curate the United States Pavilion at the Biennale. “His work confronts contemporary issues and he has by now influenced generations of artists in our country and internationally.”

Mr. Puryear will create new, site-specific pieces for the pavilion, a Palladian-style 1930 structure, including sculpture for its galleries and an outdoor installation in the forecourt. A spokeswoman said the artist was traveling on Tuesday and unavailable for interviews (which he typically avoids). The Biennale will run May 11 through Nov. 24, 2019.

In 2017, the United States chose the Los Angeles abstract painter Mark Bradford to represent the country.



“Shackled,” 2014, an iron sculpture by Mr. Puryear with a metal hoop at the top, reminiscent of the cuffs once used aboard slave ships. Martin Puryear, Matthew Marks Gallery

With the involvement of the Conservancy, a nonprofit organization that programs Madison Square Park in New York, this is said to mark the first time that the United States Pavilion will be organized by an institution focused exclusively on public art. In 2016 the Conservancy and Mr. Puryear collaborated on his monumental sculpture “Big Bling” for that park, a 40-foot high construction of plywood and chain-link fencing with a gold-leaf shackle.

“People notice great contradiction in that sculpture,” Ms. Rapaport said. “It was stately and overwhelming and it was rough-hewed and it was refined and, for an artist who created work out of chain-link fence, it was significant because he chose to use a conventional urban material.”

Mr. Puryear’s selection was first reported by ArtNews and Jerry Saltz of New York magazine before it was officially confirmed by The New York Times on Wednesday.

The State Department is contributing a \$250,000 grant toward the pavilion, as it has in previous years. The artist is selected by the nonpartisan Advisory Committee on International Exhibitions, a panel of scholars, professors, and artists convened by the National Endowment for the Arts.

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In conjunction with the pavilion, the Conservancy and Mr. Puryear will work with underserved youth through Studio in a School in New York and Istituto Santa Maria Della Pietà in Venice.

Darby English, an art history professor at the University of Chicago, will serve as the project's exhibition scholar; Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects will serve as exhibition designers.



Mr. Puryear, left, received a National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama in 2012. Alex Wong/Getty Images

While African-American artists have historically been overlooked by major art museums, Mr. Puryear is one of the exceptions. In 2007 the Museum of Modern Art organized a retrospective of his work, which traveled to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. In 2015, an exhibition of his lesser-known works on paper opened at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York.

The artist has also been publicly recognized, receiving the National Medal of Arts in 2011, the Gold Medal in Sculpture by the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2007, a MacArthur Foundation award in 1989 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1982.

Born in 1941, the first of seven children, Mr. Puryear was raised in Washington, where he attended Catholic University of America and majored in biology before switching to art. Mr. Puryear joined the Peace Corps and went to Sierra Leone, where he learned West African woodworking and basket weaving. His work retains links to tribal art.

After the Peace Corps, Mr. Puryear spent two years at the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts in Stockholm and assisted the cabinetmaker James Krenov, experiences that allowed him to investigate local craft traditions and modern Scandinavian design. Mr. Puryear's first solo exhibition was at the gallery Gröna Paletten in Stockholm in 1968.

He also spent time in Japan, where he expanded his knowledge of ancestral traditions like weaving and pottery.

In 1969, with Post-Minimalism at its height, Mr. Puryear pursued his M.F.A. at Yale, where he was influenced by two prominent visiting instructors: Robert Morris and Richard Serra, Minimalist sculptors who wanted viewers to "experience" their work in an encompassing, physical way.

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Mr. Puryear's "Big Phrygian" (2010-14), based on the soft Phrygian cap that became a symbol of liberty during the French Revolution. Martin Puryear, Matthew Marks Gallery

"Minimalism was the dominant sculptural movement of Martin's formative years," said the prominent curator John Elderfield. "He transformed it by combining it with the traditions of crafts and woodworking, to create very varied, highly original forms informed by the natural world and wide-ranging cultural experiences."

Although Mr. Puryear once said of Minimalism, "I looked at it, I tasted it, and I spat it out" — rejecting the strict geometry and industrial fabrication — he also drew on its forms in his multifaceted use of wood.

"I actually don't think my choice of materials makes me so unique," Mr. Puryear told *The Times* in 2017. "Sculptors still work in wood, but what may seem a bit unusual today is that my works are still mostly made by hand, by myself and one or two assistants."

After leaving Yale in 1971, Mr. Puryear joined the faculty of Fisk University in Nashville, then taught at the University of Maryland in College Park while maintaining a studio and residence in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. When a 1977 fire destroyed many of his possessions and artworks, the artist went to Chicago, where he taught at the University of Illinois.

He ultimately settled in Accord, N.Y., and went on to create large public art projects for such sites as the River Road Station of the Chicago Transit Authority, Chevy Chase Garden Plaza in Maryland, Belvedere Plaza in New York's Battery Park City and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Seattle.

Among Mr. Puryear's best-known works is "Ladder for Booker T. Washington" (1996), a serpentine wood structure that seems to stretch to infinity, suggesting the long — potentially elusive — climb to success.

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“Ladder for Booker T. Washington” (1996), by Mr. Puryear. Martin Puryear, Matthew Marks Gallery; Photo: John Wronn/Museum of Modern Art

Having “emerged from the Minimalist and Postminimalist vortex,” the art critic Roberta Smith wrote in *The Times*, the artist’s handworked sculptures “soothe more than seethe, balancing between the geometric and the organic with Zen aplomb” even as they also engage with charged subjects like race, African-American history, ritual and ethnic identity.

“These references seep out of his highly allusive, often poetic forms in waves, evoking the earlier Modernism of Brancusi, Arp, Noguchi and Duchamp, but also carpentry, basket weaving, African sculpture and the building of shelter and ships,” she added. “His work slows you down and makes you consider its every detail as physical fact, artistic choice and purveyor of meaning.”

He has also often revisited the soft Phrygian cap, which became a symbol of anti-loyalist resistance during the French Revolution. With “Big Phrygian” (2010-2014), Mr. Puryear created the cap writ large, as a five-foot-tall, red cedar-wood rendition.

“The Phrygian cap represents a brief preoccupation of mine,” Mr. Puryear told *The Times* last year. “I noticed that it seems to have been a signifier for the idea of liberty, going back to ancient Greece, but also during the French and American revolutions.”

In the publication accompanying Mr. Puryear’s solo show at London’s Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art, the art historian Robert Storr wrote that the history of the African diaspora “is profoundly ingrained or, more accurately,

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meticulously bundled by the artist into much if not all of his work, without the artist or the work ever become preachy or ‘teachy.’”

To be sure, even as Mr. Puryear’s work challenges viewers to consider weighty questions of oppression and racial identity, his approach is subtle, his touch light.

“What is there, and has consistently been throughout Mr. Puryear’s career,” Holland Cotter wrote in *The Times* in 2014, “is work that’s political, playful, sweet to the eye and deep.”

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