

September 02, 2023

Bloomberg

“6 Ways to Make New Monuments for the National Mall”

Link: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2023-09-02/new-monuments-fill-history-s-gaps-on-the-national-mall-in-dc>



A detail from of the sculpture “Of Thee We Sing” by vanessa german, which marks a groundbreaking performance by Marian Anderson in 1939. Photo: AJ Mitchell Photography

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6 Ways to Make New Monuments for the National Mall

The temporary memorials in the new public art exhibit “Beyond Granite” reconsider the histories that this space commemorates.

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2023年9月2日 at GMT+8 19:29

Nothing happens quickly on the National Mall. Building a new museum or memorial on this 146-acre strip between the US Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington involves approvals that can stretch out for decades. President Barack Obama was in grade school when efforts began in earnest to build a Black history museum in 1968; he inaugurated the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture almost 50 years later. Even modest changes, like a sculpture garden renovation, can take years to pull off, and ambitious projects fail all the time. Legislation, fundraising, bureaucracy, oversight: Each step is its own monumental undertaking.

So to see a series of memorials planned and executed on the Mall in under a year's time – even temporary monuments – feels like a major shift. “Beyond Granite,” which is on view through Sept. 18, features sculptural works by six prominent contemporary artists that speak to the values embodied in America's cultural treasury. It's a striking exhibit that reconsiders the histories that the Mall commemorates and the form that monuments can take. Moreover, this collection reimagines how the Mall should work: less for history, more for people.

“Beyond Granite” is a project steered by Monument Lab, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit studio that is working to rethink how memorials are built from the bottom up. The exhibit is a partnership between the Trust for the National Mall, National Park Service and National Capital Planning Commission, with funding from the Mellon Foundation. Curators Paul Farber and Salamishah Tillet asked six artists to think about histories that haven't been commemorated by the Mall and to look to moments when the Mall was charged by people, not statues. The artists found inspiration in such events as Marian Anderson's poignant Easter Sunday concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939, the first display of the AIDS memorial quilt on the Mall in 1987, and even everyday play by tourists and residents.



Wendy Red Star's "The Soil You See..." features a glass rendering of the artist's own thumb. *Photo: AJ Mitchell Photography*

Consider the three-ton granite sculpture by Wendy Red Star, an Apsáalooke (Crow) artist. "The Soil You See..." features a giant thumbprint, modeled on the artist's own mark and rendered in glass. Red soil embedded in the glass forms the thumbprint. On closer inspection, tiny words within the ridges of the pattern spell out the names of some 50 different Crow leaders who brokered treaties with the US government – documents often signed with their thumbprints. The text begins with a quotation from Curly Crow, one of the few survivors of the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876: "The soil you see is not ordinary soil – it is the dust of the blood, the flesh and bones of our ancestors. . . . You will have to dig down through the surface before you can find nature's earth as the upper portion is Crow."

Star's sculptural monument stands in Constitution Gardens, a small plot tucked away in a pond dedicated to the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Her work deepens the commemoration of the nation's founding by expanding its subject and history. The piece is formally compelling, a sculpture in a visual dialogue with the Washington Monument: Her fingerprint mimics the forced-perspective games people play on the Mall by taking photos that appear to show them touching the tip of the obelisk. From the perspective of someone standing in Constitution Gardens, the history elevated by Star in her thumbprint is just as large as that of Washington.



Derrick Adams's installation "America's Playground: DC" takes the form of a playground before and after the end of segregation. *Photo: AJ Mitchell Photography*



Adams's sculptural take on separate-but-equal facilities. *Photo: AJ Mitchell Photography*

For his installation, African American artist Derrick Adams took a page from local history to illustrate the end of a dark chapter in the American story. “America’s Playground: DC” is both a sculpture and a working playground, bifurcated by a billboard-sized photo installation into two mirror-image halves – one colorful, one grayscale. The photo dividing these play areas was taken at a local playground just days after a US Supreme Court decision ending segregation. Adams’s piece is a like a before-and-after vision of social progress, separate-but-equal facilities rendered in color. Kids don’t need to know that to enjoy playing here, which reflects how children learn the values of the world.

The US Supreme Court ended segregation in public schools across the states with its landmark 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. But that didn't apply to schools in the District of Columbia, which wasn't (and isn't yet) a state. The oversized photograph that divides the playground was taken in Edgewood Park in Northeast DC after a different 1954 decision (*Bolling v. Sharpe*) that found segregation to be unconstitutional at schools and facilities in the District, too. It's rare to see exhibits on the Mall make any gesture toward local history; too often, artists who come here to make projects for national museums only see DC as a site for marches and protests. "America's Playground: DC" finds Adams determined to use the Mall to connect with actual local Black history.



"For the Living" (2023), an earthwork piece by Tiffany Chung, uses landscaping materials to trace the routes of refugees and exiles fleeing the Vietnam War. Photo: AJ Mitchell Photography

Some of the works in “Beyond Granite” could only work on the Mall. “For the Living” by Vietnamese American artist Tiffany Chung is both a response to and quotation of the nearby Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the paradigm-shifting modernist memorial designed by Maya Lin. Chung’s landscape installation forms a map of the world that shows migration outflows from Vietnam during and after the war. Like Lin’s scar-shaped memorial, Chung’s piece is a landscape design, but instead of the black granite of Lin’s formal memorial, Chung has used fugitive materials like landscape edging and rope. Her materials suggests haste and improvisation and a sense of making do with circumstances at hand: resonant themes for a piece about displacement.

The Mall is not an ideal site for all the formal strategies brought by “Beyond Granite” artists. “Homegoing” is a multimedia sound installation by African-American scholar Ashon T. Crawley that points to the Black funeral tradition of the same name. His piece is a series of objects like benches with built-in speakers that broadcast an original gospel in three parts composed by Crawley. Both as a scholar and performer, Crawley’s work is fascinating – he is working on a history of the Hammond organ that examines its central role in Black spiritual life – but it’s difficult to experience this quiet, subtle shrine the way the artist intends, given the bustle of its location near the Washington Monument.

“Of Thee We Sing” got the best and worst placement on the Mall. The sculpture by African-American artist vanessa german, who stylizes her name with lowercase letters, depicts Anderson as she delivered her historic performance in 1939. This statue marks the spot, more or less, where Anderson performed for tens of thousands of people who could not see her in a more-traditional DC venue, because the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to book a Black artist at Constitution Hall. The sculpture by german is the most traditionally commemorative, giving Anderson her flowers in a literal sense with steel-and-resin lilies at her feet. It’s tough to compete for viewers with the statue of the 16th president sitting in the Lincoln Memorial just a short jog away, but those who wander over will get a deeper understanding of what this site means to the city.



Musical notes in the dress of the sculpture “Of Thee We Sing” by vanessa german represent the spiritual “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” *Photo: AJ Mitchell Photography*

For all its many uses for inaugurations, marches and festivals, the Mall has only rarely hosted art exhibitions. Back in 2014, the National Portrait Gallery invited Cuban artist Jorge Rodríguez-Gerada to make a six-acre photo montage out of sand near the Reflecting Pool. A decade earlier, Canadian sound artist Janet Cardiff designed a multi-sensory audio walk that took listeners out of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and onto the Mall. Artists use the Mall for one-off pieces all the time: The performance artist Sherman Fleming used the edge of the East Building of the National Gallery of Art to shave his face in 1978. But official Mall exhibits? Not so much.

“Beyond Granite” brings together contemporary art that’s both compelling and accessible. For “Let Freedom Ring,” Honduran American artist Paul Ramírez Jonas built a bell tower that performs all but the last note of the song “My Country, ’Tis of Thee.” At the base of this tower is a giant bronze bell, cast in a foundry outside of Richmond, Virginia, that viewers can gong with a mallet to complete the familiar melody. In its admirably earnest, borderline-*cringe* indulgence of civic participation, “Let Freedom Ring” is a piece that could plausibly live on the Mall forever. Another work in “Beyond Granite” has already found a new home: “The Soil You See...” by Red Star has been acquired by the Tippet Rise Art Center in southern Montana, where it will have an ancestral site-specific significance.

“Beyond Granite” shows that the National Mall can host more than sepulchral statues and war memorials in marble and granite. It can be vibrant and inclusive and contemporary. Above all, the Mall can try out new ideas to see what resonates with the people to whom it belongs.