



**UNITED STATES PAVILION
58TH INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION, LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA
*MARTIN PURYEAR: LIBERTY/LIBERTÀ***

Presented by Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York
Commissioner and Curator: Brooke Kamin Rapaport, Deputy Director and
Martin Friedman Senior Curator, Madison Square Park Conservancy

ON VIEW:

MAY 11–NOVEMBER 24, 2019
10:00–18:00 (closed Mondays)
United States Pavilion, Giardini della Biennale, Venice, Italy
Vaporetto Stops: Giardini 1, 2, 8, 4.1, 4.2, 5.1, 5.2, 6.1, 6.2

PRE-OPENING

MAY 8–10, 2019, 10:00–19:00
United States Pavilion, Giardini della Biennale

PRESS CONFERENCE

THURSDAY, MAY 9, 2019, 11:00
United States Pavilion, Giardini della Biennale

New York, NY | May 8, 2019—The United States Pavilion at the 58th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, presents new and recent work by Martin Puryear, an artist recognized for a fiercely independent sculptural language ascending from his long-term scrutiny of national and international sources and for an exacting practice that foregrounds technique, materiality, and meaning in sculpture. Organized by Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York; commissioned and curated by **Brooke Kamin Rapaport**, Deputy Director and Martin Friedman Senior Curator at the Conservancy; and presented by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and the U.S. Mission to Italy, *Martin Puryear: Liberty/Libertà* meditates on a theme that has remained central to Puryear's work over the course of his more-than-fifty-year career. Featuring recent sculptures and new works, including a monumental installation in the Pavilion's forecourt, the exhibition explores ongoing issues related to liberty and its inherent complexities in American and global societies.

This exhibition marks the first time in the history of Biennale Arte that the U.S. Pavilion has been organized by an institution whose visual-art program is focused exclusively on public art. Puryear and Madison Square Park Conservancy previously collaborated on the commission of his monumental public sculpture *Big Bling* in New York's Madison Square Park in 2016–17.

Martin Puryear: Liberty/Libertà reflects Puryear's long-held interest in the power of objects in visual culture and how they are shaped by historical and contemporary contexts. While his vocabulary is distinctly American, his practice incorporates different manifestations of material culture from around the world. Using techniques from international makers, Puryear summons disparate sources of inspiration to create associative content that concentrates elements across cultures, continents, eras, and perspectives. By these means, his work challenges expectations

about how everyday forms become sources and symbols that transform perception, inspire individuals, and question history.

“For more than five decades, Martin Puryear has created a body of work distinguished by a complex visual vocabulary and deeply considered meaning. His exacting method and nuance have influenced generations of artists in the U.S. and internationally,” said Rapaport, Deputy Director and Martin Friedman Senior Curator at Madison Square Park Conservancy. “When Puryear learned that he would represent our country at the Venice Biennale, his response was that he would do so both as an artist and as a citizen. This position is not a discovery for those who know Puryear and his sculpture. His enduring approach has galvanized his work throughout his prolific career: issues of democracy, identity, and liberty have long propelled him. Madison Square Park Conservancy is proud to partner with Puryear and bring our expertise and experience as an institution dedicated to public art to the U.S. Pavilion, which provides a critical spotlight on one of the most significant and influential artists working today.”

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Conservancy and Puryear are realizing outreach programs with opportunity youth in the U.S. and Italy through a collaboration between the **Studio Institute of Studio in a School**, New York, and **Istituto Provinciale per l’Infanzia Santa Maria della Pietà**, Venice.

Martin Puryear: Liberty/Libertà is funded in part by **The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State** and the **U.S. Mission to Italy** and has received lead sponsorship support from **Bloomberg Philanthropies**.

ABOUT MARTIN PURYEAR: LIBERTY/LIBERTÀ

For the galleries and forecourt of the U.S. Pavilion, Puryear has created work that ruminates on the theme of liberty and its complicated interpretation and application throughout American and global history. The exhibition begins outside with a major sculptural statement: *Swallowed Sun (Monstrance and Volute)* (2019), an open-work architectural screen with a flying buttress-like support. The work has been fabricated industrially from the artist’s drawings and maquette.

Upon entering the Pavilion, visitors encounter two works that explore the symbolic properties of headwear, a motif that has fascinated Puryear throughout his career and that runs through the exhibition. The steel visor and crown of *Tabernacle* (2019) generate an overall form based on a forage cap worn by Union and Confederate infantry during the Civil War. Inside the hat’s outsize crown, the artist has constructed a wood replica of a dissected Civil War-era siege mortar with a mirrored cannonball-like sphere nestled in its barrel. *Tabernacle* is Puryear’s deliberation on American gun violence, so often enabled through something resembling religious zealotry. Adjacent to this, the lattice-like bronze sculpture *Aso Oke* (2019) recalls the weave of the eponymous textile and cloth cap that are part of the national dress of Nigerian men, worn throughout West Africa. The cloth caps are donned with the crown flipped to one side over the wearer’s ear, and Puryear’s graceful reference to current vernacular style emanates from the sculpture’s draped stance. The literal translation of the Yoruba term *aso oke* is “top cloth” or “precious cloth.” Both the cap and the textile itself carry spiritual, ceremonial, and cultural significance and have become for many a manifestation of political independence.

Puryear’s examination of symbols of reverence continues in the next gallery with *Cloister-Redoubt or Cloistered Doubt?* (2019), a sculpture made of several types of wood. A small, sheltering form is perched on radiating wood beams under a soaring, overarching canopy. The artist has characterized the sculpture as a meditation on the mystery of religious belief and a view of faith as an elaborately constructed edifice—what he describes as a “refuge from reason.”

A Column for Sally Hemings (2019), conceived specifically for the rotunda of the U.S. Pavilion, echoes the four Doric columns at the building's entry. A shackled cast-iron stake is driven into the top of the column, destabilizing the pristine purity of the column's classic form. Puryear's sculpture is dedicated to Sally Hemings, an African American slave owned by Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States. Jefferson was the father of her children. The work takes on additional significance within the U.S. Pavilion, which was designed by the New York architecture firm Delano and Aldrich in 1929–30, during the Great Depression, and was inspired by Monticello, Jefferson's home and plantation in Virginia. Jefferson, in turn, was influenced by the Renaissance master Andrea Palladio, who looked to ancient Greek sources and worked magnificently in Venice and the Veneto.

In the next gallery, Puryear's long reckoning with how a utilitarian object can evoke monotonous labor, seasonal ritual, oppression, or emancipation is demonstrated by *New Voortrekker* (2018), in which a covered wagon is pulled uphill by a vehicle with elliptical wheels. Among the ongoing motifs that have occupied the artist are carts and wagons, conveyances to unknown destinations that can transport riders to freedom or into oppression. The cart is also a sign of the vast contemporary global migration by displaced people. This work is paired with *Hibernian Testosterone* (2018), a full-scale replica created by the artist of the outsize skull and antlers of the long-extinct great Irish elk. The elk's "headwear," in the form of a twelve-foot span of antlers, is believed to have been an evolutionary tool for defense and attracting mates but is now a defunct signifier of masculine physical prowess.

Puryear, in the final gallery of the exhibition, returns to the iconography of the hat and its manifold associated meanings with one of his iconic works, *Big Phrygian* (2010–14). In this nearly five-foot-tall painted-red-cedar sculpture, Puryear draws on the form of the Phrygian cap, used across cultures and eras—from ancient Dacia to the French Revolution to the Caribbean islands under French colonial rule—to symbolize freedom or the pursuit thereof. In Puryear's hands, this cultural artifact becomes a wellspring as its meaning shifts and invites interpretation, first from wearer to viewer, and then from artist to audience.

Martin Puryear: Liberty/Libertà features an exhibition design by **Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects**, who worked closely with Puryear and Rapaport to create a unified experience of the works on view in the outdoor forecourt and within the galleries. **Julia Friedman**, Senior Curatorial Manager, and **Tom Reidy**, Senior Project Manager, both of Madison Square Park Conservancy, have contributed to all aspects of exhibition organization and installation.

Darby English, Carl Darling Buck Professor at the University of Chicago, is the dedicated exhibition scholar and collaborated with Rapaport on text panels and interpretive materials. He also authored an essay in the exhibition catalogue, which includes additional essays by Rapaport; **Anne M. Wagner**, Class of 1936 Professor Emerita at the University of California, Berkeley; and the cultural writer **Tobi Haslett**. The catalogue, available in June 2019, is designed by **Miko McGinty, Inc.**, and published by **Gregory R. Miller & Co.**

For more information about the 2019 U.S. Pavilion, please visit:
[http://martinpuryearvenice2019.org/.](http://martinpuryearvenice2019.org/)

ABOUT U.S. PAVILION SPONSORS

Martin Puryear: Liberty/Libertà is made possible by The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Mission to Italy. Bloomberg Philanthropies is the lead sponsor of the exhibition. Leadership support is provided by Ford Foundation, The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation, Agnes Gund, Ellsworth Kelly Foundation and Jack Shear, Henry Luce Foundation, Matthew Marks Gallery, and Helen and Charles Schwab. Benefactor support is provided by Carmel Barasch Family Collection/Morris A. Hazan Family Foundation, Marie-Josée

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About Bloomberg Philanthropies: Bloomberg Philanthropies works in nearly 480 cities in more than 120 countries around the world to ensure better, longer lives for the greatest number of people. The organization focuses on five key areas for creating lasting change: Arts, Education, Environment, Government Innovation, and Public Health. Bloomberg Philanthropies encompasses all of Michael R. Bloomberg's charitable activities, including his foundation and his personal giving. In 2018, Bloomberg Philanthropies distributed \$767 million. For more information, please visit bloomberg.org.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in 1941 in Washington, D.C., Martin Puryear is an American sculptor whose work is recognized for the subtlety and power of its form and inherent symbolism. Puryear's work is in the permanent collections of major museums across the U.S. and internationally. He represented the United States at the 1989 Bienal de São Paulo, where he was awarded the festival's grand prize, and his work was included in Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany (1992). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, organized a retrospective of Puryear's work in 2007, which traveled to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. *Martin Puryear: Multiple Dimensions* opened at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York (2015) and traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. Puryear was commissioned to present a major sculpture installation, *Big Bling*, in 2016–17 by Madison Square Park Conservancy. Recent exhibitions include a solo presentation at the Museum Voorlinden in Wassenaar, The Netherlands (2018).

Puryear earned his B.A. from the Catholic University of America (1963) and his M.F.A. from Yale University (1971) and attended the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts (1966–68). He has been the recipient of prestigious awards, including a grant from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation (1981), a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship Award (1989), and the Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture (1990). He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1992) and received an honorary doctorate from Yale University (1994) and the National Medal of Arts (2011).

Puryear attended segregated public schools through the sixth grade. He spent his childhood exploring the collections of the National Gallery of Art and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. His early years as an artist—the 1960s and 1970s—were a period of racial and political unrest in the United States. He responded by developing a rigorous methodology and created work imbued with content and subtlety. While serving in the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone from 1964 to 1966, Puryear learned local woodworking and carpentry techniques, consolidating and refining his skills in subsequent years through the study of Japanese architecture and garden design, Native American canoe and Greenland kayak

construction, and furniture making (both Scandinavian modernist and Shaker). Puryear lives and works in the Hudson Valley region of New York State.

ABOUT THE COMMISSIONER/CURATOR

Brooke Kamin Rapaport, Commissioner and Curator of the U.S. Pavilion, is Deputy Director and Martin Friedman Senior Curator at Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York. Since joining the Conservancy in 2013, she has overseen its program of commissioned public sculpture exhibitions by contemporary artists including Diana Al-Hadid, Tony Cragg, Leonardo Drew, Teresita Fernández, Josiah McElheny, Iván Navarro, Giuseppe Penone, Martin Puryear, and Arlene Shechet. Through Madison Square Park Conservancy, she established Public Art Consortium, a national initiative of museum, public-art-program, and sculpture-park colleagues.

Rapaport has worked as a museum curator, independent curator, and art writer. During her 13-year tenure at the Brooklyn Museum, she organized numerous exhibitions and wrote corresponding catalogues in her roles as assistant and then associate curator of contemporary art. As part of the Brooklyn Museum's Grand Lobby series of installations, she worked with contemporary artists to realize their projects. As guest curator at the Jewish Museum in New York, she organized *Houdini: Art and Magic* (2010), an interdisciplinary exhibition on the life and enduring significance to contemporary artists of the magician and escape artist Harry Houdini, and the retrospective exhibition *Louise Nevelson: Constructing a Legend* (2007). Rapaport has also held positions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and the Jamaica Arts Center in Queens, New York. She is a contributing editor and frequent writer for *Sculpture* magazine and a regular lecturer, moderator, and panelist on contemporary art and public art.

Rapaport received her B.A. *cum laude* in art history from Amherst College and completed her M.A. in art history from Rutgers University. She is also the recipient of a Helena Rubinstein Fellowship in Museum Studies from the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. She serves on the Board of Directors of Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City and is Vice President of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation in New York. She currently serves on the board of the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College.

ABOUT MADISON SQUARE PARK CONSERVANCY

Madison Square Park Conservancy cultivates and enlivens Madison Square Park, a dynamic seven-acre public park in New York City's Flatiron District and one of the city's most treasured greenspaces. Through its public-art commissions, horticultural stewardship, and engaging programming, and under the leadership of Executive Director **Keats Myer**, the nonprofit organization creates an urban oasis that welcomes a diverse community of more than 60,000 visitors each day.

Since 2004, the Conservancy has become a leader in commissioning new works of public art, having curated and presented more than 35 major site-specific installations and solo exhibitions through its Mad. Sq. Art programming. Led by Brooke Kamin Rapaport, Deputy Director and Martin Friedman Senior Curator, the program invites leading artists to push the boundaries of their practice and create risk-taking new works that experiment with materiality, scale, and theme in response to the park's unique environment. The ambition of the commissioning program expands each year alongside the diverse range of innovative artists selected, who have included Diana Al-Hadid, Tony Cragg, Iván Navarro, Martin Puryear, Arlene Shechet, and Ursula von Rydingsvard.

In June 2019, the Conservancy will present a new commission by Leonardo Drew. His multilayered work *City in the Grass* will be his first major public project. For more information, please visit <https://www.madisonsquarepark.org/mad-sq-art>.

ABOUT LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

Established in 1895, the International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia is considered the most prestigious contemporary art exhibition in the world, introducing hundreds of thousands of visitors to exciting new art every two years. The 58th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia (May 11–November 24, 2019) is directed by Ralph Rugoff.

ABOUT THE U.S. PAVILION

The United States Pavilion, a building in the neoclassical style in the Giardini della Biennale, Venice, opened on May 4, 1930. Since 1986, the U.S. Pavilion has been owned by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and managed by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, which works closely with the U.S. Department of State and exhibition curators to install and maintain all official U.S. exhibitions presented in the Pavilion. Every two years, museum curators from across the country detail their visions for the U.S. Pavilion in proposals that are reviewed by the National Endowment for the Arts's Federal Advisory Committee on International Exhibitions (FACIE), a group comprising curators, museum directors, and artists, who then submit their recommendations to the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Past exhibitions can be viewed on the Peggy Guggenheim Collection's website at www.guggenheim-venice.it/inglese/pavilion/index.php.

ABOUT THE BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) builds relations between the people of the United States and the people of other countries through academic, cultural, sports, professional, and private exchanges, as well as public-private partnerships and mentoring programs. These exchange programs improve foreign relations and strengthen the national security of the United States, support U.S. international leadership, and provide a broad range of domestic benefits by helping break down barriers that often divide us, like religion, politics, language and ethnicity, and geography. ECA programs build connections that engage and empower people and motivate them to become leaders and thinkers, to develop new skills, and to find connections that will create positive change in their communities. For more information, please visit www.exchanges.state.gov/us.

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For updates from Venice, follow Madison Square Park Conservancy on Twitter and Instagram: @madsqparknyc or on Facebook: @madisonsquarepark and look for #MartinPuryearVenice. www.martinpuryearvenice2019.org