Martin Puryear’s enduring approach has galvanized his art for more than five decades: issues of democracy, identity, and liberty have long propelled him.

Visitors to the U.S. Pavilion will learn how an artist’s handling of a symbolic but vital human subject—namely, liberty—can be best expressed in sculptural form through a visual language of great originality and certitude. Liberty, withholding liberty, or exploiting liberty—and entanglements with freedom, moral justice, and responsibility—have been continuous themes for Puryear, reflecting his innate understanding of how a foundational premise can summon simultaneously rock-solid doctrine and baffling fragility. Just as Puryear constructs sculpture in stages—from an initial intellectual concept to a drawing on paper to a three-dimensional plan or maquette to the final work—a journey toward liberty sets out from an idealistic philosophy to a declaration of a social contract.

Puryear leads with his work. He is a maker of objects—in wood, bronze, iron, tar, mesh, granite, fieldstone, and other materials—at a time when technological innovation has pushed into the work of many. The sculpture culls and clarifies across cultures, continents, eras, and perspectives. Analyzing cultural cross-currents is a deep-rooted method and Puryear as an artist who is as aware as he has been influential. While he has lived through and eschewed many art movements in a period in which the innovation technological is divenuta prassi per molti artisti. La scultura seleziona e chiarisce elementi che attraversano culture, continenti, ere e prospettive. L’analisi delle correnti interculturali è un processo dalle radici profonde, che caratterizza Puryear come artista consapevole e influente. Il suo lavoro, che attraversa ed evita molti movimenti artistici del XX e XXI secolo, è famoso per la loro indipendenza. L’audacia di Puryear sta nel fare i conti con la cultura materiale storica e contemporanea per esplorare un senso dal modo in cui gli oggetti quotidiani si evolvono, sono manipolati o trasformati nel tempo. Il pubblico può quindi percepire quanto la sua scultura sfide le aspettative e fino a che punto metta in discussione la storia, modifici la consapevolezza, indagni il concetto di libertà.

Visitors may thus discern how his art for more than five decades: issues of democracy, identity, and liberty have long propelled him.

Il pubblico potrà scoprire che la ricerca artistica su un aspetto umano simbolico ma tangibile—ovvero, la libertà—si può esprimere al meglio in forma scultorea grazie a un linguaggio visivo estremamente originale e sicuro. La libertà, la sua negazione o strumentalizzazione—e il suo legame con libertà personale, giustizia morale e responsabilità—è un tema costante per Puryear e ne riflette l’intima comprensione del modo in cui una premessa fondante richiami simultaneamente una dottrina solidissima e una fragilità sconcertante. Proprio come Puryear costruisce la scultura per gradi—dall’idea iniziale al disegno su carta, al modello tridimensionale fino all’opera finale—il raggiungimento della libertà procede dall’ideale filosofico all’elaborazione di un documento, all’esperienza vissuta e alla ratifica del contratto sociale.

Puryear ci guida attraverso la sua scultura. È un creatore di oggetti—in legno, bronzo, vimmiri, ferro, catrame, rete, granito, sassi e altri materiali—in un periodo in cui l’innovazione tecnologica è divenuta prassi per molti artisti. La scultura seleziona e chiarisce elementi che attraversano culture, continenti, ere e prospettive. L’analisi delle correnti interculturali è un processo dalle radici profonde, che caratterizza Puryear come artista consapevole e influente. Il suo lavoro, che attraversa ed evita molti movimenti artistici del XX e XXI secolo, è famoso per la sua consapevolezza. L’audacia di Puryear sta nel fare i conti con la cultura materiale storica e contemporanea per esplorare un senso dal modo in cui gli oggetti quotidiani si evolvono, sono manipolati o trasformati nel tempo. Il pubblico può quindi percepire quanto la sua scultura sfide le aspettative e fino a che punto metta in discussione la storia, modifici la consapevolezza, indaggì il concetto di libertà.

Martin Puryear Studio.
Model for Swallowed Sun (Monstrance and Volute), 2019. Photo: Jeanne Englert

Da più di cinquant’anni la produzione artistica di Martin Puryear è stimolata da un approccio costante: temi come fedeltà, democrazia e libertà da tempo ispirano l’artista.

All works by Martin Puryear (American, born 1941). Unless noted, all works collection the artist, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Unless noted, all photos by Ronald Amstutz

Tutte le opere esposte sono prodotte da Martin Puryear (americano, 1941). Ove non altrimenti indicato, le opere provengono dalla collezione dell’artista, per gentile concessione della Matthew Marks Gallery. Ove non altrimenti indicato, fotografie di Ronald Amstutz.
The steel visor and crown of Puryear’s Tabernacle generate an overall form based on a forage cap worn by Union and Confederate infantry during the Civil War. Like many other works by the artist, Tabernacle contains a world within a world, its black canvas shape suspended from a gridded exoskeleton, its interior lined with an early nineteenth-century floral-printed French textile. Viewers peer into the work’s center through a glass window; its mullions in the window form crosshairs.

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. Viewers are implicated: they see themselves reflected in the shiny surface of the globe. Tabernacle is Puryear’s meditation on America’s festation of independence.

A tabernacle is a place of worship, whether large enough to house a congregation or intended to hold a single icon. A tabernacle is a place of worship, whether large enough to house a congregation or intended to hold a single icon. A tabernacle is a place of worship, whether large enough to house a congregation or intended to hold a single icon. A tabernacle is a place of worship, whether large enough to house a congregation or intended to hold a single icon. A tabernacle is a place of worship, whether large enough to house a congregation or intended to hold a single icon. A tabernacle is a place of worship, whether large enough to house a congregation or intended to hold a single icon. A tabernacle is a place of worship, whether large enough to house a congregation or intended to hold a single icon. A tabernacle is a place of worship, whether large enough to house a congregation or intended to hold a single icon.
Cloister-Redoubt or Cloistered Doubt?, 2019  
American hemlock, Eastern white pine, tulip poplar, red cedar  
99½ × 96 × 53 in. (253 × 244 × 135 cm)  
In this sculpture made of several types of wood, a small, sheltering form is perched on radiating wood beams under a soaring, overarching canopy. These elements combine to present an image of an inaccessible protected space, what the artist calls a “refuge from reason.” Puryear has described the implicit tension between an expansive, organic gable and an insular construction that forms a dark, remote space. 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. The work reckons with contemporary religious fervor, confronts the fortification of a redoubt cloistering off the exteriority of difference, and summons the interiority of a gridded form that suggests both sanctuary and confinement.

A Column for Sally Hemings, 2019  
Tsuga americana, pino strobo, tulipifero, cedro rosso  
253 × 244 × 135 cm  
In questa scultura composta da legni di varie essenze, la piccola forma di un riparo sta appollaiata su travi di legno disposte a raggi, sotto una copertura che si innalza ad arco. L’insieme di questi elementi offre l’immagine di uno spazio protetto e inaccessibile, che l’artista definisce un “rifugio dalla ragione”. Puryear descrive l’implicita tensione esistente tra un ampio frontone organico e una costruzione chiusa a formare uno spazio buio ed isolato, e definisce questa scultura una meditazione sul mistero della fede religiosa, una fede concepita come un edificiometicolosamente costruito. L’opera riflette sul fervore religioso contemporaneo, prende in esame il rafforzarsi di un rifugio che esclude la differenza all’esterno, ed evoca l’interiorità di una forma reticolare che fa pensare a un luogo protetto ma anche a una prigione.

A Column for Sally Hemings, 2019  
Cast iron, painted tulip poplar  
80 × 15⅜ × 15⅜ in. (203 × 40 × 40 cm)  
Puryear’s newest sculpture, 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 and pulls the flutes down into the center, 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 U.S. Pavilion dates to 1930, and the New York firm Delano and Aldrich brought a neoclassical vocabulary to this Depression-era building. It was influenced by the Renaissance master Andrea Palladio, who also inspired the design of Monticello, the plantation and home Thomas Jefferson designed for himself in Virginia. Palladio, who looked to ancient Greek sources, worked magnificently in Venice (San Giorgio Maggiore and Il Redentore) and the Veneto.
Among the ongoing motifs that have occupied Puryear is the cart or wagon. The artist has long recognized how a utilitarian object can evoke monotonous labor, seasonal ritual, oppression, or emancipation. Carts and wagons are also conveyances to unknown destinations that can take the rider to freedom, to liberty. There is always ambiguity in Puryear’s cart sculptures, and the artist has described their association with “the idea of escaping into an unknown future, of traveling to safety, of taking dreams of advancement with you.”

Nineteenth-century Americans, motivated by Manifest Destiny or Romantic naturalism, traveled west in covered wagons, and South Africa’s Voortrekkers departed from the British Cape Colony for the country’s interior. The contemporary wagoner is the American “prepper” who anticipates the apocalyptic end of civilization through war, economic collapse, or social unrest. The cart is also a sign of the vast contemporary global migration of displaced people fleeing political persecution, drought, conflict, and war.

With some mirth and some mordancy, the artist evokes the outsize skull and antlers of the great Irish elk, a species of giant deer, long extinct. The creature’s antlers were disproportionately huge, even for its massive body. The elk’s defensive “headwear” could span over twelve feet (four meters) in width and is believed to have evolved as a tool for sexual display and combat, but it is now a defunct signifier of masculine physical prowess. Although this creature originally ranged throughout Europe, the fossilized remains have been found preserved in peat bogs in Ireland (which the ancient Romans called Hibernia). Paleontologists offer several hypotheses to explain why the largest species of deer, dating to the prehistoric era, may have realized its own evolutionary demise, including the metabolic toll of testosterone production, powering the growth of those stunning antlers every year.
In this work, Puryear draws on the form of the historical Phrygian cap, which Dacian prisoners are shown wearing on the early-second century Column of Trajan in Rome and which freed slaves donned in that ancient capital city to demonstrate their freedom. During the French Revolution, the hat came to symbolize liberty, and Eugène Delacroix placed prisoners wearing it on the early-second-century Column of Trajan in Rome and the Phrygian cap. Later, enslaved blacks in the United States at the 1899 Biennial de São Paulo, where he was awarded the festival’s grand prize, and his work was included in Documenta IX (1992) in Kassel, Germany. 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. An exhibition of his drawings, 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 by Madison Square Park Conservancy to present a major sculptural installation, Big Bling. In 2016, a solo exhibition was presented at the Museum Voorlinden in Wassenaar, The Netherlands (2018).


Martin Puryear (born 1941) is an American sculptor whose work is recognized for the subtlety and power of its form and inherent symbolism. He represented the United States at the 1999 Biennial de São Paulo, where he was awarded the festival’s grand prize, and his work was included in Documenta IX (1992) in Kassel, Germany. 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. An exhibition of his drawings, 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 by Madison Square Park Conservancy to present a major sculptural installation, Big Bling. In 2016, a solo exhibition was presented 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). He also attended the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts (1966–68). He has been the recipient of prestigious awards including a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation grant (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 in 1992 and awarded an honorary doctorate by Yale University in 1994 and the National Medal of Arts in 2011.


BROOKE KAMIN RAPAPORT
COMMISSIONER AND CURATOR

Brooke Kamin Rapaport è Direttore Deputy e Martin Friedman Senior Curator of Madison Square Park Conservancy in New York. She is responsible for the Conservancy’s commissioned, public sculpture exhibitions by contemporary artists. She is Commissioner e Curatore del la Biennale di Venezia.

Brooke Kamin Rapaport è Vicedirettore e Martin Friedman Senior Curator della Madison Square Park Conservancy di New York. È responsabile del programma di mostre di sculture pubbliche commissionate dalla Conservancy ad artisti contemporanei. È commissario e curatore della mostra Martin Puryear: Liberty/Libertà alla 58th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia.

UNITED STATES PAVILION
IL PADIGLIONE DEGLI STATI UNITI D’AMERICA

The United States Pavilion, a building in the neoclassical style, opened in the Giardini della Biennale 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.

Il padiglione degli Stati Uniti d’America, edificio in stile neoclassico, è stato inaugurato nei Giardini della Biennale il 4 maggio 1930. Dal 1986 il padiglione è proprietà della Fondazione Solomon R. Guggenheim ed è gestito dalla Collezione Peggy Guggenheim di Venezia, che opera in stretta collaborazione con il Dipartimento di Stato e con i curatori delle mostre per installare e manutenerne tutte le mostre ufficiali allestiti nel padiglione.

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Martin Puryear: Liberty / Libertà, the official United States presentation at the 58th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, is organized by Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York, and is presented by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Mission to Italy. The exhibition is produced with the collaboration of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.

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