

ON THE TOWNS; The Great Outdoors As a Showcase For Sculpture

By BARRY SCHWABSKY
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WHEN the weather grows warm, art lovers begin to think about the art they can see outdoors. But where?

A sculpture park like Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton is an obvious destination, but outdoor sculpture, as well as murals and other public artworks, are scattered in plazas, along streets, in parks and on campuses throughout the state, and it can be easy to overlook something special.

To find out more about the hidden treasures of outdoor art in New Jersey, we asked several knowledgeable people -- artists, curators and administrators -- to talk about artworks in public places that mean something special to them. BARRY SCHWABSKY

'The Constructors' in Trenton

I have dozens of favorite public artworks, but the one I keep coming back to is "The Constructors," the George Segal sculpture at the Mary G. Roebling Building at 20 West State Street in Trenton, right in the heart of downtown near the state capital. It's one of Segal's biggest pieces, and the only one I know of with figures standing above ground level. It shows three workers, in bronze with a white patina, who are in the process of building a structure out of steel I-beams. One figure sits atop one of the beams at second-floor level; another is climbing up a ladder, and the third figure stands at ground level holding a rope.

The I-beam was invented in Trenton, which was a great producer of steel bridges, and Segal evokes that history. And the colors in the piece are exclusively red, white and black, which were the ones favored by the Constructivist artists earlier in the century, so he evokes that influence in sculpture as well. Another interesting layer to the work is that, along with a couple of his favorite models that you see in many of Segal's sculptures, the model for the figure holding the rope was Herk Van Tongeren, another fine sculptor who has some very important public sculptures of his own around the state. Herk posed for the piece in around 1986, and he died in 1987, the year it was completed.

-- Tom Moran, senior program officer for visual arts at the New Jersey Arts Council

'Acheron' in Hamilton

It is my conviction that outdoor sculpture has to integrate with its site to create a special sense of place. I strive to achieve it in my own work, though I would be uncomfortable recommending my own sculpture. A work that I feel is successful is "Acheron," Marsha Pels's boat at the edge of the water at Grounds for Sculpture. It works beautifully with its site -- I don't know whether the artist herself sited there or not, but that doesn't matter -- and it also has a visceral quality, a sense of texture. It's alive; it's warm. And it's understated. It doesn't scream out at you that it's a work of art. It lets you take a while to figure it out.

Tova Beck-Friedman, a Hoboken-based sculptor whose work has most recently been seen at the Ben Shahn Galleries at William Paterson University in Wayne

Abraham Lincoln in Newark

When I was a kid growing up in Newark, I used to go down to the old courthouse in Newark and sit on Abraham Lincoln's lap. That's really the only public sculpture I've had any relation to. I don't even know if it's still there. I don't get back that way very often anymore.

Willie Cole, artist, whose work was recently exhibited at the Morris Museum in Morristown

'Miss Victory' In Jersey City

I choose "Miss Victory," which is officially called the "Soldiers, Sailors and Marines Memorial," the monument to the northern Civil War veterans that stands in front of City Hall in Jersey City. It's a female figure looking up to the sky with outstretched arms. I'm attracted to its form and sense of gesture, but also because I'm interested in the idea of justice and in the genealogy of ethics.

We have some less metaphorical war monuments in Jersey City, but this one embodies quality through its lyricism as well as its symbolism. Its ethical stance comes through in how finely crafted and sculptured it is, in the way its graceful lines and undulations and folds create a drawing in space. It's an allegory conducive to thinking about justice.

Alison Weld, artist and curator

'Light Dispelling Darkness,' Edison

One of my favorite pieces of outdoor sculpture, and one of the most endangered, is called "Light Dispelling Darkness." It's in Roosevelt Park in Edison, and it was made in 1937 by a sculptor called Waylande Gregory. A lot of people are confused by it because it's so unusual, both in its material and in its subject matter. It's in an unusual material for an outdoor sculpture, and a very fragile one: terra cotta. It was originally

intended to function as a fountain, though it no longer does. Gregory is an artist whose work is just beginning to be rediscovered and appreciated again. He was the head of the W.P.A. Sculpture Project in New Jersey and a ceramist with his own studio, as well as strong links to the terra cotta industry in Perth Amboy. "Light Dispelling Darkness," which is the only extant outdoor sculpture remaining from the New Jersey component of the W.P.A., and which Gregory executed with the help of 10 other sculptors, is an example of the Moderne or Deco style that was widespread in the 1930's. In its depiction of the vices, it mixes a certain degree of realistic representation with a kind of gargoylesque stylization.

Meredith Bzdak, an architectural historian who is a co-author, with Douglas Petersen, of "Public Sculpture in New Jersey: Monuments to Collective Identity," to be published this fall by Rutgers University Press

'The Nine Muses' in Hamilton

A sculpture I like very much is "The Nine Muses," by Carlos Dorrien. It's dated 1990-97, and it's at Grounds for Sculpture. The piece is in the process of being reinstalled in a reflecting pool. It consists of nine rectangular granite blocks standing on end. They are spaced out along the perimeter of a large square, seemingly defining the walls of a plaza. The blocks are tall, narrow, rough-hewn. To a casual viewer, they may seem undistinctive, perhaps a set of oversized boundary markers. Very subtly, mostly on the faces interior to the plaza, classical figures have been partly carved into them. The figures are in low relief. They are best seen in raking light; otherwise, the figures hide within the rock surface. Discovery of the figures raises questions about the plaza they delineate. The plaza and its muses dwell in some sort of twilight: they could be the eroded remnants of some ancient civilization, or they could be the birth of new gods just emerging from the rock.

Ricardo Barros, a Princeton-based photographer who has been making portraits of sculptors for three years

PSE&G Plaza in Newark

After you posed this question to me, I had a few ideas about it, but I decided to walk around and look at a number of my favorite objects around town here in Newark before narrowing it down to a single object. In the end, I couldn't choose any of them. The work I like most in Newark is not an object, but rather the plaza in front of the PSE&G building at Park Place and Raymond Boulevard, a well-designed outdoor space that I'm fond of because it represents the future of Newark. The building was designed by the architectural firm of Poor, Swanke, Hayden & Connell and built in 1983.

Other public artworks seem to speak of the past or even the present, but not the future. A big part of what defines this city in people's minds is that this is the city that basically was sacked in the 1960's. It's been a long, slow climb back in the three decades since then, but most of the architecture around really reflects that old reality, although the New Jersey Performing Arts Center represents a major accomplishment in that climb back. I don't want to eclipse that. You see all these gates and bridges around; a fortresslike architecture pervades the city. It's not people-friendly.

By contrast, although some people have criticized the plaza for being the wrong scale or for other reasons, this sunken, open performance area is conceptually the most powerful statement about space that we have. No public artwork that I know of in Newark makes a statement or creates a space like that. I hope that planning for the future development of public space in Newark, which seems imminent, includes some thinking about world-class contemporary art.

Victor Davson, painter, exhibition organizer and director of Aljira: A Center for Contemporary Art in Newark

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