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On a Once-Hidden Estate, a Sculpture Show With Deep Emotional Resonance

Inspired by photos of dancers, 29 works by Kristine Mays celebrate the enslaved people who once toiled on such properties.





Wire sculptures by Kristine Mays in an exhibited titled “Rich Soil” enlivened the gardens at the Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens in Washington, D.C. Credit...Erik Kvalsvik/Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

By Kerry Hannon

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This article is part of our latest [Fine Arts & Exhibits](#) special report, about how art institutions are helping audiences discover new options for the future.

On a recent morning, the blooming gardens of the [Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens](#), tucked away in the northwest corner of Washington, D.C., were alive with flashes of movement.

There were children careening down the slope of a manicured lawn and couples posing for selfies while hugging life-size, three-dimensional dancing wire sculptures that seemed to float above the ferns and foliage.

The vibrant 13-acre formal garden is far removed from its past as a hidden, exclusive enclave that was the home of [Marjorie Merriweather Post](#), daughter of the breakfast-cereal tycoon C.W. Post.

Hillwood, a private [museum](#), opened to the public in 1977 after Ms. Post's death, and displays her predominantly 18th- and 19th-century French and Russian art collection, featuring the work of Fabergé, Sèvres porcelain, Gobelins tapestries and Aubusson carpets.

But in June, it was the garden exhibition, "[Rich Soil](#)," by the San Francisco artist [Kristine Mays](#) that welcomed post-pandemic visitors to stroll its pathways and play amid the seven groupings of her 29 sculptures, each of which is made from thousands of separate pieces of rebar tie steel wire looped and hooked together.

It is all part of a bold [program](#) to transform a staid and restrained museum that has long been hidden from the consciousness of many of the city's residents and visitors.

Editors' Picks



Image

From a distance, the sculptures look delicate. But up close, they are rigid and tough. Credit...Erik Kvalsvik/Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

“It was the most highly attended summer in our history, with more than 25,000 visitors from June 12 to Aug. 31,” said Rebecca Tilles, Hillwood’s associate curator of 18th-century French and Western European fine and decorative arts and the curator of the exhibition. “That’s 21 percent ahead of the same time in 2017 — the previous record for summer attendance,” she said.

“More people have discovered us because of ‘Rich Soil,’” she said. “And there’s a noticeable difference — our visitors are younger and more diverse ethnically than in the past.”

The exhibition, originally displayed last year at [Filoli](#), a historic house and garden in Northern California, from May to early November, was reimaged with different sculptures for Hillwood. It runs to Jan. 9.

‘Fighting for Change’: Life as a Black Artist

Oct. 19, 2021

It is “a celebration of all of the enslaved people who once toiled on the property, and this idea of them coming back, like their spirits rising up from the soil and rejoicing now that they’re free,” Ms. Mays, who is Black, said. “I felt like I was creating for my own ancestors.”

Moreover, there is a “beautiful thing that happens when you connect nature with art,” she said. “People interact with both and embrace the sacred nature of creation.”

Ms. Mays finds that photographs often serve as her muse. “I love to collect photographs of people in all forms of movement — if they’re dancing, or if they’re running, or if the wind is blowing against them,” she said.

For this exhibition, the inspiration was a series of photos capturing the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater company performing “[Revelations](#).” “These images reflect sorrow, jubilation and hope,” Ms. Mays said.

She explains the heart of her craft this way: “If you’re watching someone you love and they unconsciously do something — say, you notice the way they brush their jacket, or a certain way that they turn, and you catch them at an angle, and you try to remember that moment.

“You can see it in the work in the sense that there are pieces where the dresses are blowing in the wind,” she added. “It’s about trying to grasp a moment in time.”

The outdoor exhibition “is rare for Hillwood,” Ms. Tilles said.

“But it is in line with its mission to educate and inspire and in sync with Post’s love of dance as a patron of the Washington Ballet and American Ballet Theater.”

And it’s dance that these groupings evoke. “Dancing is the most freeing thing,” Ms. Mays said. “You just get swept up in it. You’re not really thinking. You’re not self-conscious. You rise. It’s the ultimate freedom.”

There’s plenty to reflect on as one ambles along the lanes or simply sits cross-legged on the rolling hillside. “It’s grasping something that we don’t have forever,” Ms. Mays said. “I’ve had a lot of loss in my life and I think that people can really relate to that right now in the time that we’re in.”



Image



The sculptures, Ms. Mays said, are like the spirits of enslaved people “rising up from the soil and rejoicing now that they’re free.” Credit...Erik Kvalsvik/Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

There’s also a secondary message that although these wire sculptures appear delicate and soft from a distance, up close, they are firm and tough, Ms. Tilles said. There is a feeling of resilience and determination pushing the dancers to move and climb above the blossoms.

For those who look carefully, there’s an additional, semi-obscured significance. The first piece in the show, for instance, has a text by the poet Maya Angelou woven into the bodice and the skirt: It reads: “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” This sculpture was recently acquired by the museum and will be permanently on display after the exhibition.

As Ms. Mays said: “It’s about reconnecting to a deeper purpose — the soul and spirit of our lives. I create the outer shell, the exterior of a human being, but provoke you to see what’s within.”

Children look at it very differently than adults do, she said. “Some look at it purely for what it is — ‘oh, that’s a pretty dress.’ Whereas someone else might look at it and they’ll see the spirit and essence that’s within the dress.”

In that vein, Ms. Mays uses her art to touch upon current political and social events. Specifically, the wire-sculpture grouping called “Little Worlds Within Us” consists of a

rumpled hoodie and a short dress across from it, paying tribute to [Trayvon Martin](#) and [Breonna Taylor](#), young African Americans whose deaths inspired nationwide protests.

There's a "peacefulness in being in these beautifully established gardens," Ms. Mays said. "The artwork adds another element to it and opens another sensory awareness. I love the fact that each piece can stand alone, but together they interact and create a sense of community."

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