

# 28 Greats

*A Celebration of African-American Art and Artists*



Martin Puryear. Photo by Francesca Bottazzin.

Celebrated sculptor **Martin Puryear** (b. 1941, left) is that exceptionally rare example of a contemporary artist who is dedicated to traditional craft techniques while still receiving favorable critical attention and art world success. This merging of two seemingly divergent paths is due in no small part to the sheer technical skill and innovative nature of his work.

Growing up in Washington, D.C., Puryear was interested in carving and creating objects in his youth. His two-year stint in the Peace Corps, teaching English and art in Africa, was a pivotal

experience; working in Sierra Leone from 1963-65, he learned woodworking skills from local carvers that he would apply to his artistic practice. A graduate of the MFA program at Yale University, Puryear eschewed the narrow minimalist, industrial approach of his contemporaries, preferring instead to create objects that, even at their large scale, reflected a sense of being handcrafted, their meaning resting largely in their formal qualities.

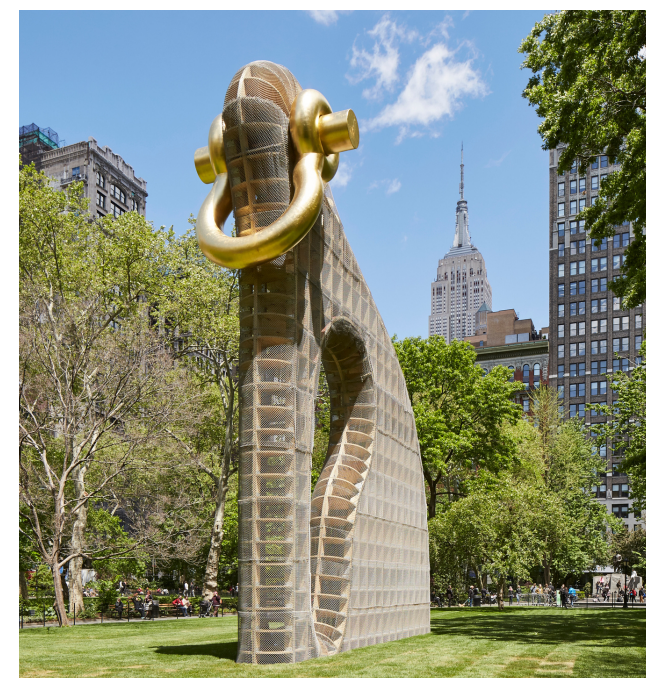
In some cases, however, his titles appear to imply more specific meanings, such as *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (1996, below). But, as Puryear noted in an interview for the documentary series *Art 21*, the title came afterwards; the main consideration for him was the challenge of carving the piece, and the illusion of impossible perspective it presents--it simply cannot be as long as the recession into space would suggest. Only later, when thinking about the differences between Booker T. Washington, a believer in gradual change for social good achieved by working within the system, and W.E.B. Du Bois, who advocated for more immediate change, did the idea come to him of the ladder as a metaphor for gradualism and the continuing struggle for equality. But he still maintains that viewers can and should interpret the work on their own terms.

Puryear has received accolades throughout his career, from a MacArthur Grant (1989) to his being chosen to represent the United States at the 2019 Venice Biennale, where he showed *A Column for Sally Hemings* (right, top). A fluted column--evoking Thomas Jefferson's passion for classicism and Enlightenment ideals--is impaled with a stake and shackle. For Puryear, who usually avoids direct statements on race, this was a unique and powerful commentary on the nation's coming to terms with Jefferson's ideals and his paradoxical personal history as a slaveowner.

In spring 2017 his colossal, animal-like sculpture *Big Bling* (right, center) was on view in Madison Square Park. The temporary installation, his largest to date, coincided with the exhibition of two Puryear painted sculptures at KAM (right, bottom) in the show *The State of New York Painting*. Martin Puryear's vast body of public works and museum pieces have made him nothing less than a national treasure: in 2011 he received the National Medal of Arts, the highest honor given to artists by the U.S. government.



Martin Puryear, *A Column for Sally Hemings*, 2019. Installation view, Venice Biennale.



Martin Puryear, *Big Bling*, 2016. Temporary installation at Madison Square Park, NYC. Wood and fencing, 40 ft.



Martin Puryear, *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, 1996. Maple and Ash wood, 36 feet. Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.



KAM was honored to have the opportunity to exhibit this piece, one of two carved pine and maple stools by Martin Puryear, in the exhibition *The State of New York Painting*, curated by Michael Walls.