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Six outdoor sculptures you might walk by without realizing they're by famous artists
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Image: "Bearing Witness" by Martin Puryear. (Amanda Andrade-Rhoades for The Washington Post)

Funny thing about public art: a lot of it disappears.

Dropped into the streets of the District and its suburbs usually without wall text, the art of famous sculptors often becomes a nearly invisible backdrop to a hasty commute.

But at a time when current events have forced us to slow down, challenging us to reassess public space — both as an incubator for disease and a place to breed, protest (or memorialize) racial injustice — public sculpture hints at possibilities beyond men on horseback or artworks in claustrophobic galleries.

The Washington area is home to outdoor sculpture by many well-known artists, several of whom did not receive public commissions until late in their careers, when their style and vision had reached their fullest form. This allowed them to put forth their most distilled visual arguments to a wider audience, for some of whom the gilded halls of the museum may never have seemed welcoming.

It's cliche to say art offers us new ways of seeing, but it's also true. And yet public sculpture goes a step further: Challenging the austere urban landscape, jeering at Brutalist architecture and inviting people into the street, these six works — all on view without reservation or ticket — are rambunctious, cunning, quiet and loud. They offer not just new ways of seeing, but new ways of being.

Image: "Sky Landscape" by Louise Nevelson. (Amanda Andrade-Rhoades for The Washington Post)

Sky Landscape

1101 Vermont Avenue NW

Louise Nevelson's 1988 abstraction, in black aluminum, does not seek attention. It slips from memory like a half-forgotten, late-night reverie.

Perhaps you've walked by it — maybe even sat under its oddly shaped shadows. The tall, dark composition should not be as forgettable as its office-building surroundings, and yet it somehow recedes from view, the visual equivalent of static.

To some artists, this would be criticism. For Nevelson, it's precisely what she wanted. One of the most influential artists of the 20th century, Nevelson once declared that she had no interest in creating sculptures or paintings. "I'm not looking to make anything," she said. "I want something else entirely. I want that extra dimension where you don't make things, but you live with that place and you give that place a form."

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"Sky Landscape" is one of two Nevelson works commissioned by the American Medical Association in the 1980s. The other, "Sky Cathedral," has since moved to the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Nevelson is better known for that sort of work: smaller in scale, assembled from found wooden objects, all painted the same shade of black and nestled into a boxy construction like a form of avant-garde Tetris.

The artist's iconic style can be attributed to her father's work as a lumberjack, along with her lack of resources to pay for "real" supplies. Her work gestures to the craft of traditional woodworking, long disregarded by the art world, but Nevelson did not have the patience to carve. Her mind ran too quickly. She treated three-dimensional objects as if they were as fluid as the paint used by her Abstract Expressionist peers.

Shrouding objects in black, Nevelson pushed familiar forms past the brink of recognition, like silhouettes caught in 3 a.m. lunar light. Nevelson's practice might be described as a career-long investigation into shadow. To her, black represented not absence but "totality." Shadows, she believed, were windows to the fourth dimension.

Made of intentionally constructed flat planes, and dedicated the year she died, "Sky Landscape" deviates from the artist's better-known found-object assemblages. But it's also a final extension of it. "Sky Landscape" removes the training wheels, depicting shadows without the objects that cast them.

Nevelson spent a career making the ordinary unfamiliar. Here, she accomplishes another feat: making what should be unfamiliar, ordinary.

Image: "Material (SG) I" by Yinka Shonibare. (Amanda Andrade-Rhoades for The Washington Post)

Material (SG) I

1701 14th St. NW

While many public sculptures assert their permanence — despite recent evidence to the contrary — Yinka Shonibare's 2019 abstraction seems, at any second, like it could be blown away.

Installed on the sidewalk outside the Corner at Whitman-Walker cultural center, the fiberglass resin and stainless steel piece is one of the British-Nigerian artist's "wind sculptures" and the second in D.C.: "Wind Sculpture VII" has been installed outside the National Museum of African Art since Shonibare's 2009 solo show there. Unlike the memorials being toppled around the country, "Material (SG) I" — a billowing, twisting form with a bright pattern of clashing reds and greens — is unsentimental and egoless. It makes no proclamations. It's one with D.C.'s streets: energetic in style, shape-shifting in form.

Shonibare's wind sculptures evolved from the artist's 2010 commission for Trafalgar Square: a ship in a bottle, whose sails use patterns associated with African dress. Throughout his career, Shonibare has been drawn to batik for its layered cultural influences and complex, continent-spanning history. Most commonly associated with post-colonial Africa, these prints can be traced back to Indonesia, and they are manufactured mostly in Europe and China.

As a student artist in England, Shonibare was instructed to make art that was "African." Confused by this reductive notion of a multifaceted continent and frustrated by the expectation that non-Western artists be pure, while Western artists could borrow freely from other cultures, Shonibare turned, in more recent years, to batik as an argument against essentialism.

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In the wind sculptures, batik is a lively, stylistic match for light, celebratory forms. But in Shonibare's other work, it takes on darker themes. In "Scramble for Africa," for instance, an installation that depicts headless European leaders deliberating over territory in Africa, the batik is a dark sartorial choice. A tongue-in-cheek critique of the West's treatment of African culture as exotic, it also highlights the irony of colonizers' disdain for multiculturalism — despite, through exploitative pursuits, having virtually created it.

As statues of problematic historical figures continue to fall, we are learning that rendering any individual in stone or bronze is risky business. Perhaps, as some have suggested, we should not replace them. But on this street corner is a glimpse of an alternate reality, one in which space is not claimed by statues of military heroes but opened up to the public with art that's not meant to deify the individual, but to engage the people on the ground.

Image: "Coastline" by Jim Sanborn. (Amanda Andrade-Rhoades for The Washington Post)

Coastline

1301 East-West Hwy. Silver Spring

In theory, it sounds relaxing: a pool of water in the middle of a bustling suburban office plaza that echoes the waves lapping against some far-off shore. But Washington-based artist Jim Sanborn's 1993 "Coastline" is neither an escapist beach fantasy nor a garden-variety public fountain.

"Coastline" does not trickle. It booms.

Positioned at the entrance to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Silver Spring campus, the artwork emulates the rhythms of 65 feet of coastline in Woods Hole, Mass., a town on the southwest corner of Cape Cod. In a bay-shaped basin, waves crash against carefully-cut granite at quarter scale, splashing fat beads of water toward a nicely-designed public park of benches and tables. These are waves in a container, and what they lack in space, they seem to make up for in strength. It's a sample of the ocean at high potency.

The wave generator is controlled by data transmitted in real time, so the experience changes based on the weather in Massachusetts. On a recent morning, the effect was akin to being reminded by a zookeeper that the lovable panda you're admiring is vicious in the wild. The sea of "Coastline" isn't one of gently rippling waves; this is the force of nature, uncensored. It's the version of surf studied by scientists.

Sanborn, who has a background in paleontology, has made works for a variety of scientific institutions, from MIT to the National Museum of Nuclear Science and History, but he is best known for his "Kryptos" sculpture at CIA headquarters. Featuring a secret code that, nearly 30 years after its installation, still has not been fully cracked, the work has become a cult favorite among cryptologists and amateur code breakers alike.

In a 2005 interview, Sanborn said his work is driven by an urge to "make the invisible visible." In Kryptos, he took on the invisible forces of humankind: the secret messages exchanged at high levels of government. In earlier work, he explore invisible forces of nature, zeroing in on lodestones, and making the Earth's magnetic rays visible in a Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden installation.

The Washington Post
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In "Coastline," Sanborn makes the invisible, not just visible, but palpable. He gives material form to data. We're used to being able to pick up a smartphone and see the weather 378 miles away. Here, in downtown Silver Spring, in the form of drops of water launched like pellets, you can feel it.

Image: "She Who Must Be Obeyed" by Tony Smith. (Amanda Andrade-Rhoades for The Washington Post)

She Who Must Be Obeyed

200 Constitution Ave. NW

Minimalism, in the 21st century, has gotten a bad rep: it's unapproachable, inaccessible, too caught up in itself.

So it is only fitting that, while walking up this 1975 geometric abstraction by Tony Smith, a line from the movie "Mean Girls" comes to mind: "I'm not a regular mom. I'm a cool mom." (Replace "mom" with "minimalist sculpture," and the quip by Amy Poehler's character gets at something about this piece. It's got unexpected spunk.)

Sure, it's minimalist in form: nine sleek rhomboid units, specifically. But tucked away in a dreary courtyard of the Labor Department's soul-sucking Frances Perkins Building, near the entrance at Third and C streets NW, "She" — with its sky-blue surface and dramatic angle — is maximalist in color and attitude. Cast in bright blue aluminum, a rare deviation from Smith's characteristic black, the work seems to shout at its self-important surroundings: "Lighten up."

The title comes from an older (though not lesser) pop culture reference: the 1887 novel "She: A History of Adventure." And the artwork shares more with Poehler's character than attitude; it, too, is a product of suburbia.

Smith lived in South Orange, N.J., and came to prominence in the postwar era of metastasizing subdivisions and sprawling highways. He spent years as an architect, at one point working under Frank Lloyd Wright, but switched to sculpture after becoming frustrated with the disposability of houses and clients who cared more about practicalities than form. He wanted to make something more intentional and lasting.

Smith's approach to art (and, more broadly, to the ethos of minimalism) goes back to a revelation he had, after sneaking his car onto the then-unopened New Jersey Turnpike at night. On sleek unmarked pavement, led by only his headlights, Smith moved through the landscape of flats, towers, industrial buildings and smokestacks. At that speed, it all looked distant and mysterious. Captivated by the experience, he famously said, "It seemed that there had been a reality there that had not had any expression in art."

The 1950s brought a glorification of industry that is echoed in minimalist works, which often use industrial materials. But Smith's works are not of the monotonous, assembly-line variety. Smith called them "presences," and like the forms he passed on the turnpike, they need to be encountered in space, over time.

Eventually, the experience of driving on the highway, like minimalism itself, would become tedious. But there is something surprising in "She" that gets at a feeling of initial revelation. It's 21 feet tall — more than twice the height of a standard room. Standing before it, it might feel like it is trying to bend toward you, to contain you. But it's not architecture. Like the towers seen from the turnpike, "She" is just a form, suspended from function.

The Washington Post
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Image: "Anna and David" by Miriam Schapiro. (Amanda Andrade-Rhoades for The Washington Post)

Anna and David

1525 Wilson Blvd., Arlington

Miriam Schapiro's 35-foot sculpture does not know how to read the room. Atop a hill in Rosslyn, the faceless, painted aluminum-and-steel figures of a dancing woman and man shock when seen against the drab backdrop of an office building. Maybe they should tone it down? On second thought, maybe the rest of us should turn it up.

Schapiro is best known as the co-founder of a college program in feminist art, and as a seminal figure in the Patterns and Decorations movement. Based on the artist's own painting "Pas de Deux" — an intricately patterned image evoking collage, decoupage and other traditionally feminine crafts Schapiro called "femmage" — her flat-looking 1986 sculpture is an uncomfortable translation, akin to a book that makes for a mediocre movie. (It doesn't help that the sculpture, now faded and worn, has been poorly maintained.)

And at nearly twice the height of the statue in the Lincoln Memorial, Anna and David are enormous. Almost laughably so.

Commissioned by a developer, "Anna and David" does more than satisfy a Supersize instinct. With the Patterns and Decorations movement, such artists as Joyce Kozloff treated decorative elements — hearts, flowers, lace, etc. — and practices such as quilting and sewing with seriousness.

Going massive with a work that contains similarly decorative aesthetic elements confers an importance associated with bigness. Painted with swaths of flamboyant color, "Anna and David" looks patched together like a quilt. Suddenly, that quilt is monumental.

While the color and size of the piece might give pause to some, many will accept what appears to be its uncontroversial content without question: a heterosexual couple dancing. In the context of Schapiro's feminist reputation, the meaning is more complex.

Shortly before completing "Pas de Deux," the artist painted "I'm Dancin' As Fast As I Can," featuring three dancing figures. One is distinctly feminine, one masculine, but the third, middle figure is a flurry of arm and legs, high heels and trousers, evidently torn between the binary.

With this in mind, "Anna and David" looks a bit different: Are the two figures separate? Or, like the figures in "I'm Dancing" — which some have interpreted as representing multiple identities of Schapiro herself — are they one? At first, they seem to be moving together, but maybe they are pulling apart.

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Image: "Bearing Witness" by Martin Puryear. (Amanda Andrade-Rhoades for The Washington Post)

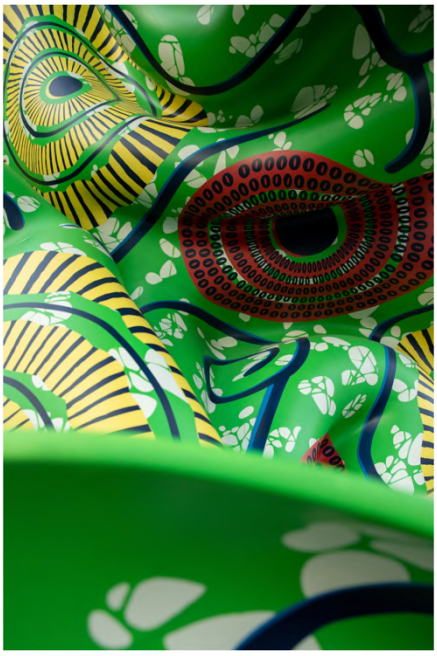

Image: Detail view of "Material (SG) I." (Amanda Andrade-Rhoades for The Washington Post)

Bearing Witness

1300 Pennsylvania Ave. NW

Clustered around the courtyard of the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center is your typical arrangement of downtown Washington's neoclassical buildings. But outside the Center's Woodrow Wilson building, Martin Puryear's towering sculpture looms with a confident restraint that does not need to be reinforced by proud columns or declarative stone. A smooth, oblong form of hammered and welded bronze, rounded on one side and flat on the other, the 1997 work at once rhymes with the curved form of the Wilson building and leans a little too close to it for comfort.

At 40 feet tall and 20,000 pounds, "Bearing Witness" features the serendipitous scuffs and markings of handmade craft that are central to the work of Puryear — who grew up in D.C. and learned woodworking while in the Peace Corps — yet on a colossal scale.

Puryear's work is always conceptually loaded, but its strength lies in the way its ideas take a back seat to form. In 2019, Puryear represented the United States at the Venice Biennale. The works he showed — including a bulbous, bright red form and a looping, taillike shape — seemed almost playful upon first encounter.

But one piece, "Column for Sally Hemings," is named after the enslaved woman who historians believe bore six of Thomas Jefferson's children. It's a cast-iron shackle mounted on a white column that references Monticello architecture. As for the red sculpture — called "Big Phrygian" after the Phrygian (or liberty) caps worn by Americans during the Revolutionary War — Puryear paired it with a poignant caption: "I am free too." Separated,

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only briefly, from their historical context, his works lure you in with visual intrigue. By delaying his message, he underscores it.

Upon the work's debut, Puryear commented that "Bearing Witness" — an enigmatic monolith that evokes a ship's hull, a head and a mask of the Fang people — was particularly challenging to make because of its institutional context. "For myself, I wanted my work to be directed toward people rather than toward the government," he said. "In a democracy, the people talk back to the government."

At a time when the public is talking back to the government with renewed fervor — and such figures as Reagan and Wilson have come under scrutiny for resisting desegregation — public space, like history, is being rewritten in real time. The content of this sculpture is as fluid as those who encounter it.

Unlike the buildings that surround it, "Bearing Witness" does not insist on one narrative. It talks back to the government, yes. But it also listens to the viewer.