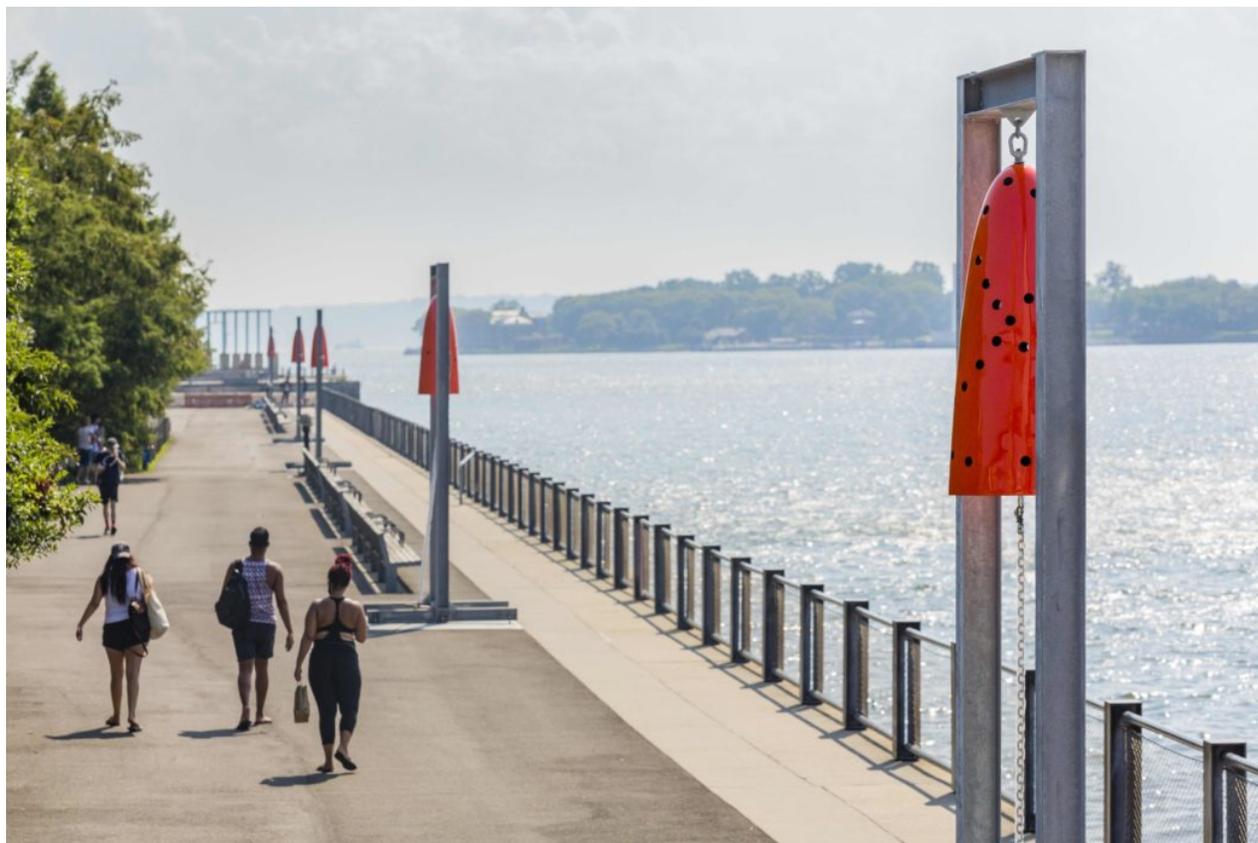


whitewall

Davina Semo: "Making Noise at the Brooklyn Bridge Park with Davina Semo's 'Reverberation'"

By Pearl Fontaine

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Davina Semo, "Reverberation," 2020, Patinated cast bronze bell, UV protected 2-stage catalyzed urethane automotive finish, galvanized steel chain and hardware, clapper; presented by Public Art Fund at Brooklyn Bridge Park
Photo by Nicholas Knight, courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY, courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.

In August, **Davina Semo's** *Reverberation* was revealed at the Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York City. The installation, presented by **Public Art Fund**, resides along the water at the park's Pier 1 until April 18, 2021, where the public is encouraged to interact freely with Semo's five large bells.

A sculptor based in San Francisco, Semo has been using her practice to explore the symbolism of the bell since 2016. In *Reverberation*, she brings her creations to life in the greatest scale yet, placing the instruments in front of the cityscape to invoke thoughts on the bell's role through history as a form of communication. Often signaling time, celebrations, and a summons for community action, the bells are of particular relevance during the current movements against systemic racism and the isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the bells composing *Reverberation* have all been painted the same bright orange hue, each was made with much thought and planning to give the bells their own, singular voice. Individually

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titled *Mother, Reflector, Listener, Singer, and Dreamer*, the harmony of sounds represents the collective action of community coming together. To learn more about the installation and the work behind it, *Whitewall* spoke to the artist.

WHITEWALL: How did the idea for *Reverberation* first come about?

DAVINA SEMO: [Public Art Fund's] **Daniel S. Palmer** and I have been in conversation about doing a project together for almost 4 years. As I developed my series of bells in the studio, I started to imagine a public project making sense—not only are bells a form that exists specifically for a public, but they are a form that could take on new meanings in this contemporary, urban context.

My project intends to position the bells as tools and instruments to call attention to the many areas of our world that need urgent care, action, and change. The title for the project comes from the double meaning of the word reverberation—the prolongation of sound, or resonance, as well as the idea of a continuing effect

WW: The bell is a recurring theme in your work. What originally drew you to this object and how has it evolved in your practice since you first began your exploration?

DS: I started learning how to make bells on a lark, and fell deeply in love with the process, the sounds, and with all the potential avenues of meaning. People all over the world have heard bells and know what they are, but many people have not personally interacted with them—especially not outside of religious contexts.

The series has evolved in many ways, from the size and shape of the bells, to their varying exteriors. I've experimented with polished bronze and automotive painting, all while learning even more about how myriad adjustments affect sound.

WW: The bells are named individually, in addition to the installation's title. What can you tell us about the significance of their names?

DS: It was important for me to take advantage of all opportunities to communicate with the public, and I felt that giving titles to each bell would highlight the individual voice of each bell, while other elements (such as color, form, placement, and the overall title) would connect the bells as a group.

For example, I wanted *Mother* to be the first bell you see, with the strong form, and loud call; the title points to ideas of protection, care, nature, and a perspective that is always looking to ensure a safe future for new generations. *Listener* is meant to acknowledge the bell's reliance on a listening public, as well as to highlight the active quality of listening, which is often thought of as a passive activity.

WW: Creating this installation required a very involved, intentional process. Tell us about making *Reverberation*. Did the process differ from your usual practice?

DS: The process of making the bells themselves began in a familiar way, albeit with a focus on a larger scale. I created the original wax bell in my studio, and then worked closely with a foundry to 3D scan and enlarge the bell digitally. We then CNC milled the full-scale bell and made a mold, which we used to create five full scale bell waxes.

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This is the first time I've used a mold to create the waxes. After the waxes were made, I drilled the holes, giving each bell its own character. We used the traditional lost wax process to cast each bell. Finally, the bells were painted using a special automotive paint.

Besides scale, the other major difference was that I had to consider the structures that would house the bells.

WW: How does your work change when the context is moved from a smaller, private exhibition to a public place like the Brooklyn Bridge Park?

DS: I'm still learning about the public response to the bells, but from my observations so far, people seem to have more fun with the bells in public! Also, the work is more photogenic against the incredible backdrop of the river, park, bridge, and city.

WW: Public art is the most accessible way for people to see art safely right now. That coupled with the current significance of the idea of a collective voice makes this installation really special. What are you hoping visitors in the park will take away from the experience?

DS: When we were planning this project, I never could have imagined just how important public space would be during this time. Public art is one of the most direct ways for people to experience art right now, and I hope the people will feel invited to have a personal experience with the bells.

For me, the ringing of the bells is an opportunity to set an intention. I have put the bells out there hoping for the encounter to allow for a reset, an opportunity for reflection, a chance to call out.

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