

ARTnews

"Lava Thomas: 'There Should Be Greater Transparency': Public Art Becomes a Political Battleground"

By Zachary Small

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A rendering of Lava Thomas' proposed monument to Maya Angelou, 'Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman,' outside San Francisco's central library. Eren Hebert

Artist Vinnie Bagwell could hear pandemonium erupting in the auditorium where seven hours of deliberation imploded as East Harlem residents clashed with New York City officials this past October over which artist's proposal would be chosen to replace a 19th-century bronze statue honoring J. Marion Sims, the infamous "father of gynecology" who conducted experimental operations on female slaves without anesthesia. The meeting drew national attention when a video circulated showing audience members bursting into tears and accusing public officials of racism. Bagwell's proposal, supported by the local community over the one chosen by a panel of art experts, was the winner, but a week after the heated debate over the decision process was featured on the front page of the *New York Times*, the city's cultural affairs commissioner tendered his resignation, a move City Hall insiders said was linked to the bad press for the mayor's office.

Around the same time in San Francisco, Lava Thomas was having her dreams crushed by local bureaucrats. Weeks after she won a prestigious commission to design the city's new monument to Maya Angelou outside its central library, the offer was revoked when the politician who passed the legislation financing the sculpture disagreed with the local artist's nonfigurative version of a memorial.

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The sudden about-face was enough to concern Angelou's son, Guy Johnson, who spoke up in protest. "While I may have wanted a different artist," he wrote to the Visual Arts Committee, "it is important for me to state that I support the democratic process ... Ms. Thomas was selected by such a process, ergo she has my approval." But the city refused to budge. The selection process restarted from step one; Thomas lost months spent working on the project; and Tom DeCaigny, director of cultural affairs in San Francisco, resigned from his position a few months later but says the decision was unrelated.

"My first reaction was confusion and disbelief," said Thomas. "This has serious implications for how public spaces are being shaped at the service of opaque political and financial interests."

"There is a cultural revolution happening in the United States, and people are realizing that they have the power to be more engaged with how public art is decided," explained Patricia Walsh, who helps run the Public Art Network, a membership group of more than a thousand public art professionals organized by the nonprofit Americans for the Arts. "Best practices need to be reinvented to become more equitable and diverse."



Vinnie Bagwell's *Victory Beyond Sims*, 2019, which will replace a statue of Dr. J. Marion Sims in Central Park.

PHOTO: JONATHAN LEWIS

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Monuments are more than historical markers; they symbolize the strength of the politicians who commission them. Traditionally, these bronze and marble statues have largely avoided scrutiny, calcifying the legacies of their benefactors for centuries to come.

But several recent initiatives across the country to diversify public art have run aground as community outrage pushes officials to reform a selection process generally regarded as outdated and oblique. The resulting chaos has become an endgame for some elected officials and arts professionals who have found themselves embroiled in monthslong controversies when their multimillion-dollar plans go awry. Artists stung by decision makers are now leading their own inquiries into the public art process, using legal avenues and community-led efforts to protect themselves and reveal backdoor deliberations that have resulted in immense loss.

"This is supposed to be a team sport," Bagwell told public officials in March. "You are supposed to be my advocates, but if you aren't answering my calls, what am I supposed to think?"

Bagwell has won 20 public art commissions in the last decade, but says that none has been as badly managed as the one she is at work on with New York City. After winning the commission, her requests to the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) for further guidelines in designing the project went unanswered for several months, until she turned to an attorney for help. "If you don't have legal coverage, you can be taken advantage of," she explained. "The challenge is that sometimes the people in authority don't realize what's required for public art. There should be greater transparency." The city's public art program has become a bottleneck with hundreds of artist projects suspended in bureaucratic purgatory due to a lack of municipal resources. Only 3 employees are tasked with handling nearly 130 active commissions worth millions of taxpayer dollars. Compare that number to those in other cities: San Francisco has 10 workers overseeing 75 projects, Austin has 7 overseeing 70 projects, and Denver has 5 overseeing 40.

Bagwell is not alone in her frustration with the city, and she may be waiting more than a few months to begin work on the commission, if the experience of other artists is any indication. More than three years after winning a competition to memorialize the mambo musician Tito Puente with a mosaic in East Harlem, artists Manuel Vega and Ogundipe Fayomi finalized their contracts with the city only this past February.

"It's become an embarrassment," said Vega, who has been creating visuals for the mosaic he plans, should the commission actually proceed now that the contract is signed. "I don't want to create an adversarial relationship with Cultural Affairs, but this isn't how we should be treated."

Prolonged delays are expected to multiply in the coming months as the world begins to feel the aftereffects of the coronavirus pandemic, which put a freeze on the majority of city programs for over a month. This will undoubtedly further worsen the backlog at the cultural affairs department.

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Rendering of *Our Destiny, Our Democracy*, Amanda Williams and Olalekan Jeyifous's proposal for a Shirley Chisholm monument in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. COURTESY THE ARTISTS

For artists and the public, how New York City prioritizes certain monuments over others remains a mystery. Some activists have resorted to filing requests through the Freedom of Information Act to require government agencies to release their records. In February, historians Jacob Morris and Todd Fine requested documents relating to the city's monuments, including those planned through She Built NYC, Mayor Bill de Blasio's \$10 million initiative to increase the number of statues devoted to historical women around the city.

The correspondence thus obtained hints at the push-and-pull of New York's public art process, and how outside interests and capital investment projects often account for otherwise oblique choices. When a million-dollar monument was announced for jazz singer Billie Holiday last year, community activists questioned the placement of the statue near Queens Borough Hall. Several elected officials—including a congressman and a state senator—signed on to a letter addressed to Chirlane McCray (the wife of Mayor de Blasio), who oversees She Built NYC, "strongly requesting" that the sculpture be moved to Addisleigh Park, a neighborhood where Holiday once lived.

"The proposed location for Billie Holiday near Queens Borough Hall was intended to place this monument in a high-profile, symbolic location in the heart of the borough Holiday called home," a DCLA spokesperson told *ARTnews*. "Discussions regarding the monument's final location are ongoing."

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Internal emails from DCLA also indicate that the agency may have expedited normal procedures for historical review and site selection for its planned monument to the Lyons family, black property owners who once lived in Seneca Village, a community destroyed in the 19th century. In emails, two Central Park historians cautioned that research indicated that the Lyons family's connection to the area was more tenuous than initially claimed. Despite unresolved questions, the city moved to announce the monument in late October. "City Hall and the funders are now refocusing on the Lyons Monument," wrote a Parks Department official to staff weeks earlier. "I have advised that we have not finalized a location recommendation, and they're fine announcing without one. However if we are able to determine a final siting recommendation, I imagine that would be preferable."

"We made these document requests to validate our suspicion that there was no coherent, historically-informed decision-making process for the siting of these new monuments," Fine told ARTnews. Referring to the coronavirus lockdown, he added, "the current interruption to city business should give the new Commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs, Gonzalo Casals, the opportunity to rethink the role of historians and experts in this important initiative."



View of Lava Thomas's installation *Looking Back and Seeing Now*, 2016, at the Berkeley Art Center.
PHOTO: JOHN WILSON WHITE

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Back in San Francisco, Thomas was having trouble getting more information about why the San Francisco Arts Commission scrapped her Maya Angelou monument. The artist had appealed unsuccessfully for clarity from the commission, which ignored her calls for a meeting with cultural affairs director DeCaigny, and ultimately denied her request for information under the city's Sunshine Ordinance—a law that ensures access to public records.

"In this case, public officials and political appointees treated artists like our time and expertise had no value," Thomas said. "Systemic changes need to be made that meaningfully address the power imbalance, lack of transparency, and lack of artist protections within the process for public art commissions administered by the SFAC."

Although her Sunshine Ordinance requests were denied, a friend's petition resulted in the release of more than one hundred pages of internal communications between the city's public art managers. These documents provided some insight into the Arts Commission's thought process. One email chain reveals that the SFAC extended the deadline for proposals by six weeks in order to allow time for "an exceptionally strong artist," whose name is redacted in the documents, to submit a design. Another document shows that Thomas was consistently a top-ranked artist in the selection process and ultimately won the commission by a substantial lead.

Given the considerable support she received from panelists and the Arts Commission, Thomas was blindsided when her plans for the Angelou sculpture were scrapped by San Francisco Supervisor Catherine Stefani, who announced at an SFAC meeting that the artist's unconventional proposal didn't meet criteria for "a significant figurative representation." The elected official ordered the competition to start again from scratch. Thomas was invited to reapply.

"What happened smacks of Trumpian politics," Thomas told *ARTnews*. "You change the rules after the fact. You make a sham of due process and do it in a very public and disrespectful way. Catherine Stefani walked into the meeting, announced her qualifications as an attorney, and said she wanted to see Maya Angelou honored the same way white men are with figurative statues."

"She left without listening to our comments," Thomas recalled, adding that the decision was especially painful coming from the supervisor, who represented one of the city's whitest and richest communities. "The whole process perpetuates institutional racism. What she did was egregious and disrespectful."

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Vinnie Bagwell's monument *The First Lady of Jazz Ella Fitzgerald*, 1996.

PHOTO: JONATHAN LEWIS

The embarrassment caught almost everyone by surprise. In December, Thomas received an official letter of apology from Susan Pontious, SFAC's public art program director. "There was a profoundly different interpretation between the Art Commission's and the legislative sponsors' understanding," Pontious wrote. "I want to assure you that we regret that everyone's hard work did not result in a final project that could be implemented."

Thomas declined SFAC's invitation to resubmit a proposal. Panelists from the original selection committee were not welcomed back. Meanwhile, questions about accountability swirled among the city's museum directors and cultural elite. Four sources told ARTnews that San Francisco Mayor London Breed played a role in axing the artist's winning monument. "It was too unconventional for her," said one person, who asked to remain anonymous because of her ongoing work with city agencies.

"Ms. Thomas' design did not align with the sponsors' expectations of a figurative statue, which is why her proposal was not approved," Rachelle Axel, a spokeswoman for the San Francisco Arts Commission, told ARTnews; however, she did not respond to questions about the mayor's role in quashing Thomas's design.

Delays on San Francisco's public art programming have become frequent and misaligned with legislation meant to create more civic sculpture. In 2018, the city passed an ordinance committing to 30 percent female representation by the year 2020. The city's supervisors would have had to commission 24 new monuments of historical women. To date, officials have commissioned zero.

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(Axel noted that women have represented more than 50 percent of public art commissions in the city and have received more than \$25.5 million for their work over the last 15 years. The city also spends more per capita on public art than any other city in the United States.)

Despite a financial investment in public works, members of the Bay Area arts community still regard San Francisco's attitude toward local artists as lacking and symbolic of the city's apathy toward culture in the wake of the 2010 tech boom. "This city no longer appreciates artists," Dorothy Santos told ARTnews. Having fought against rising economic inequality in America's costliest city alongside other artists and activists, the 41-year-old artist has seen her hometown change drastically over the years. What happened to Thomas didn't exactly surprise her. "Politicians are pandering to the wealthy tech communities that are coming into the Bay Area," she added. "If your art is not aligned with the city's agenda, then it's unlikely to gain support."

As another sign of the times, the San Francisco Art Institute issued a dire financial forecast in March after falling more than \$19 million in debt, with the prospect of closure on the horizon. The university—which is home to a major Diego Rivera mural and dates back to 1849—later said it had found local support to continue, but its future remains unclear.

Without clear regulations and guidelines for public art, experts believe that controversy is inevitable. A continuing lack of clarity rankles historians and the artists who devote their careers to creating works of civic virtue. Nevertheless, politicians have doubled down on initiatives to create new works in marble and bronze.

And monument mania is spreading beyond the monied confines of cities like New York and San Francisco. Cities from Miami to Seattle are already allocating millions to public art initiatives focused on amplifying diversity, equity, and inclusion. In Washington, D.C., local legislators have reinvigorated a multiyear effort to initiate their own sculptural renaissance—even as Mayor Muriel Bowser seeks to gain control of the city's culture budget and divert its funds to small business loans.

"Public art is and always will be a lightning rod because it's very visible," said Patricia Walsh from the Public Art Network. "I don't think this is the last time we will be hearing about controversy."

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