

The New York Times

"Lava Thomas: San Francisco Reinstates Winning Design for Maya Angelou Monument"

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

Lava Thomas has earned the right to design San Francisco's monument to the poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou — again.

Last year, an opaque selection process opened a rift between public officials and local artists when the city suddenly rejected Ms. Thomas's winning design. The reversal attempts to heal divisions. On Monday, the San Francisco Arts Commission unanimously voted to approve a previous recommendation made by a 2019 review panel for Ms. Thomas to design the luminary's sculpture.

The commission also terminated a second selection process that began earlier this year after City Supervisor Catherine Stefani — the legislative sponsor behind the project — rejected the artist's proposal because she disliked its nonfigurative elements, which included a nine-foot-tall bronze book with Angelou's portrait on one side and her words on the other.

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Stefani's decision angered many local artists, who began scrutinizing how San Francisco chooses public artworks amid a citywide effort to diversify its monuments. At a time when classical bronze statues of men are falling out of favor across the country, some artists saw the scrapped Angelou monument as an example of politicians' thwarting visions of a more diverse future. Backlash against the municipal process reached a fever pitch over the summer when Ms. Thomas was abruptly muted and refused extra time during her testimony in a public hearing with the commission.

But the artist ultimately succeeded in changing the city's mind about her proposal through months of activism and community organizing. She even received apologies from Mayor London Breed, Supervisor Stefani and the commission.

"Once we understand the power of restorative justice, and that each of us is uplifted by doing what is right, the easier it becomes," said the commission's president, Roberto Ordeñana. "We thank Ms. Thomas for holding us accountable."

Speaking with the commission's Visual Arts Committee last month, Ms. Stefani promised to reform to the public-art process, including the creation of an advisory committee that would help guide the city's continuing efforts to diversify its collection.

"When we set out to honor this incredible woman, our process did not make room for the voices of Black women," she said. "My hope is that this apology can be a first step in healing."



The artist Lava Thomas was abruptly muted during her testimony in a public hearing with the San Francisco Arts Commission over the summer. Credit: Courtesy of Drew Altizer Photography

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Ms. Thomas will receive a \$250,000 budget to design, fabricate and deliver the artwork to its final resting spot outside San Francisco's central library. The Angelou monument will become the third sculpture dedicated to a historical woman in the city's public collection of nearly 90 statues.

"Throughout this process, I have tried to uphold the principles of Maya Angelou," the artist explained. "Black women should get to decide how we are going to be represented in the public realm, not politicians."

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