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Lava Thomas: "Portrait of Phenomenal Women"

By Shaquille Heath

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Lava Thomas never backed down while creating her San Francisco monument to Maya Angelou.

In late September, the San Francisco Arts Commission (SFAC) unveiled *Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman*, a massive monument to author and poet Maya Angelou by the sculptor Lava Thomas on view outside the San Francisco Public Library's main branch. The presentation took place two weeks before the kickoff of SF/Bay Area Black Art Week, which began Tuesday and runs through Sunday.

The tribute is long overdue for Angelou, whose writing, like her 1969 memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, continues to have an indelible impact. Angelou has a deep local connection as one of the first Black female streetcar conductors in San Francisco history.

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It's also a long time coming for Thomas, who fought for years to ensure that her vision of the sculpture would actually come to fruition. "It's been a long and sometimes arduous journey to get to this point," Thomas tells me. "But ultimately, all of the challenges make it all the sweeter."

The story of *Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman* is partially a story about a city's systemic failures. In 2019, the SFAC rejected Thomas's previously accepted proposal for a portrait of a young Angelou on the side of a nine-foot-high book. Supervisor Catherine Stefani, the monument's legislative sponsor, wanted a more "traditional monument." But as Thomas said in a statement from July 2020, Stefani's request was "weaponizing a European convention of statuary to reject my work by insisting that Dr. Angelou be honored 'in the same way that men have historically been elevated in this city'—the very same men who embody white supremacy in monuments that have recently been toppled and removed."

After public outcry, including from Bay Area collectives like See Black Womxn, Thomas's design was reapproved, and the creation of *Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman* went forward.

"I am grateful for—and humbled by—all of the support that I received," Thomas tells me. "I don't have words to describe the gratitude that I feel because none of this would have happened. The reinstatement would not have happened if I had been acting alone."

"In all of this," she continues, "municipalities need to understand that when they embark on a process to honor an extraordinary individual with an artwork, that selection process has to be handled with integrity, and it needs to reflect the values that those individuals embody. That's why we're honoring them in the first place."

Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman was finally unveiled the morning of September 19 to an excited crowd. The image of Angelou, drawn by Thomas, is based on a still from a 1973 PBS interview Angelou did with Bill Moyers.

"The interview is powerful on so many levels," Thomas explains. "It occurred during a time of national political, social change and conflict: 1973 was the year that *Roe v. Wade* was codified into law. The country was reeling from the Nixon Watergate scandal, and the Vietnam War was beginning to unravel after years of anti-war protests."

"She already had a sense of herself on a global stage, not really being tied to any one regional place—although San Francisco would always hold a special place in her heart," Thomas says.

Thomas was intentional about every step in the creation of the work, grounding as many details as possible in the history of Black aesthetics. She based the choice of bronze on the Benin bronzes from West Africa; she took inspiration from the Black artists in Angelou's personal art collection, like Elizabeth Catlett, whose memorial to Ralph Ellison in Harlem was an inspiration for the piece. Thomas was insistent that the monument be the complete opposite of typical European conventions of figurative statues seen around the country. The sculpture's form is a

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book, not Angelou's figure, since, as Thomas says, "she said in an interview, 'I am a writer, and a writer is his or her books.'"

"I settled on the book form as this symbolic repository of her life and works—which also tied the monument visually to the library and spoke to how important libraries were in her life," Thomas says.

While Thomas worked to invoke Angelou's spirit with *Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman*, she was recovering from breast cancer. "At this point, I'm five years cancer-free. I'm a cancer survivor. And it's really a story of triumph," Thomas says. "It really was a special time that allowed me to walk with Maya Angelou. It was as if I had Dr. Angelou on one shoulder and my grandmother on the other!"

On the front of the monument, under Angelou's profile, is the title of her iconic poem "Still I Rise," which felt appropriate to Thomas after the challenges she faced bringing this sculpture to the public. "You know, sometimes life throws you in a situation to test what you're made of," she says. "I had to be courageous. I had to pursue truth and justice. And I had to persevere. Dr. Angelou has said, 'You may encounter defeat, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter defeat so that you know who you are.'"

"For me, that has been this process's greatest gift. I know who I am, and now so does everyone else."