

San Francisco Chronicle

Lava Thomas: "'Still I Rise': S.F. unveils Maya Angelou monument after years of controversy"

By Tony Bravo

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Lava Thomas stands next to her artwork along with, from left, San Francisco Mayor London Breed and Maya Angelou's niece Rosa Johnson Butler and grandson Elliott Jones during the unveiling ceremony for "Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman" at the San Francisco Public Library's main branch on Thursday, Sept. 19.

Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

Even before the 9-foot-tall bronze monument to author Maya Angelou was lifted into place and bolted onto its stone base, Berkeley artist Lava Thomas seemed finally able to exhale. After a more-than-five-year process, her excitement at the sculpture's installation was mixed with a new lightness.

Although the winding journey to realize the work was not far from people's minds at the unveiling of "Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman" at the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library at 100 Larkin St. on Thursday, Sept. 19, joy was the overwhelming sentiment.

"It has been a long time coming, but we are so happy this moment is finally here," said Ralph Remington, director of cultural affairs for the city of San Francisco during the dedication ceremony, which also included remarks from Mayor London Breed, City Librarian Michael Lambert, and Angelou's grandson and niece, Elliott Jones and Rosa Johnson Butler.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

The monument, Remington reminded the crowd, was the first work in San Francisco's Civic Art Collection to honor a Black woman. Also notable, it was created by a Black woman. As the audience of more than 450 family, friends and supporters cheered, some shouted, "And not the last!"



Family members as well as chosen family of the late Maya Angelou raise their hands to be recognized during the ceremony for "Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman."
Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

Three days earlier, the Chronicle was with Thomas as she took a moment to stand on the spot where her bronze, book-shaped sculpture featuring her portrait of Angelou would be placed. She rocked her body and shook her head back and forth, exclaiming, "Yes!"

The inscription at the base of the work clearly showcases the title of one of Angelou's most famous poems, "Still I Rise" — a particularly relevant message considering what Thomas endured to bring the sculpture to fruition.

Her proposal for the work was accepted in 2019 by a panel that included Angelou's son, Guy Johnson, then revoked by Supervisor Catherine Stefani for not being "traditional" enough, then accepted again with a formal apology from Stefani and Breed.

All the while, Thomas, an accomplished artist whose work is in the collections of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, and the monument process itself were under enormous media attention locally and nationwide. The scrutiny was heightened at first by the nation's larger conversations about public monuments and then, in 2020, by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement reignited by the murder of George Floyd.

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Youth Speaks members Bethlehem Melaku, left, and Naia Chien perform with Veronica Juarez, not pictured, during the ceremony for "Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman."

Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle



Jyarland Daniels of San Francisco listens at the ceremony unveiling Lava Thomas' monument to Maya Angelou.

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SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

"It's as if history aligned that the social justice protests were happening around the country, the Black Lives Matter protests in response to so many Black folks being murdered, and also, with monuments being taken down," Thomas reflected.

Even after her selection was reinstated, getting the work created was at times difficult. Thomas dealt with supply chain issues, a change in foundries and a battle with long COVID all slowing the process.

She now hopes her ordeal will make the city's process for determining future monuments more fair and transparent.

"I feel like the city really did right the course," she said. "Now because of this process, the ideals and the principles and the values that Dr. Angelou stood for are as much a part of the monument as the bronze and stone that it's physically made of."



Berkeley artist Lava Thomas.
Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

Angelou as the subject of a city monument was chosen in 2017, when then-Supervisor Mark Farrell announced legislation to increase the representation of women in public art. The famed poet and author of "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" lived in San Francisco as a teenager, attending Washington High School and Glide Memorial Church. Members of the Glide choir performed at Thursday's ceremony.

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SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Beyond her contributions to literature, Angelou performed as a singer at the famed North Beach nightclub the hungry i, and, at 16 years old, she was the city's first Black female streetcar conductor. A lifelong civil rights activist, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2010 and became the first Black woman featured on United States currency when a quarter commemorated her in 2022. Angelou was active until her death at age 86 in 2014.

Breed thanked the San Francisco Arts Commission and monument committee for their "great work and thorough vetting in making what I believe is truly the right decision in what you will see here today."

Lambert revealed a limited-edition library card featuring Thomas' portrait of Angelou. Johnson Butler recalled her aunt's love of libraries as a place of learning and safety, and called Thomas' selection as the work's artist "divinely guided."



Lava Thomas' portrait of Maya Angelou graces the cover of swag bags during the unveiling ceremony for "Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman," a monument in honor of Angelou now installed at the San Francisco Main Library.

Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

In acknowledgment of that love, on the back of the sculpture is a quote from Angelou: "Information helps you to see that you're not alone. That there's somebody in Mississippi and somebody in Tokyo who all have wept, who've all longed and lost, who've all been happy. So the library helps you to see, not only that you are not alone, but that you're not really any different from everyone else. There may be details that are different, but a human being is a human being."

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

When the "Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman" was officially unveiled, what was immediately apparent was how finely Thomas' drawing of Angelou — based on her 1973 television interview with journalist Bill Moyers — had transferred onto the bronze. The portrait's hair, eyes and other features appear 3-D. While Thomas said she had to adapt some of her usual line work and adjust her shading technique for the drawing to translate in the new media, she "wanted the drawn line and also the texture of the paper to be a part of the monument."

Among the throngs inspecting the new monument were Maya Mosley, president of the San Francisco chapter of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority of which Angelou was a member, and fellow member and attorney Jyarland Daniels.

"I'm a transplant to San Francisco like Dr. Angelou. How San Francisco resounds with her as a place of beauty and freedom, that's exactly what it means to me," said Daniels. "It's important for Black women to see themselves, but it's important for every single person to believe they can rise."

Correction: A previous version of this story misstated Elliott Jones' relationship to Maya Angelou. He is her grandson.

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