Philadelphia project seeks public reckoning with monuments

By Natalie Pompilio | AP September 4

PHILADELPHIA — By artist Sharon Hayes’ count, Philadelphia has more than 1,500 sculptures honoring male historic figures — heroes on horseback, visionaries with arms folded and eyes looking forward, the usual round-up of Founding Fathers.

By contrast, there are only two sculptures dedicated to women — religious martyrs Joan of Arc and Mary Dyer.

The realization prompted, “If They Should Ask,” as assemblage of nine pedestals encircled by the names of more than 80 women that Hayes thought were worthy of being memorialized.

The exhibit is part of Monument Lab, a citywide public art and history project that asks people to join a conversation about “history, memory and our collective future.” Temporary monuments by 20 different artists, including Hayes, are popping up around the city that answer the question posed to the artists: “What is an appropriate monument for the current city of Philadelphia?”

“A monument claims a space. It’s trying to say, ‘This is who we celebrate and this is who we think is important,’” Hayes said. “I think the current climate is showing us they are meaningful.”

Monument Lab, produced by the city’s Mural Arts Program, has been in the works for years but comes in the midst of a national debate on the meaning of monuments.

While the topic has long been controversial, it has turned deadly after a woman was run down in Charlottesville during a rally by white nationalists, who were angry about the planned removal of a Confederate General Robert E. Lee statue.

The fact that statuary can stir such passion is “a reminder of how powerful things are in a public space,” mural arts executive director Jane Golden said. “This project is aimed at building civic dialogue, stirring people’s imaginations as a force for positive change.”

The project grew out of one of Paul Farber’s classes at the University of Pennsylvania. Farber, managing director of Penn’s Program in Environmental Humanities, asked students to note which famous Philadelphians were immortalized in sculpture and which were not.

They found very few honoring specific women and no public art honoring a person of color. However, this fall, the city plans to unveil a statue of Octavius V. Catto, a black Philadelphia writer, educator and activist. Monument Lab organizers say it’s the first to honor a lone African-American in Philadelphia.

“Monuments are reflections of power dynamics and power possibilities,” said Farber, the project’s artistic director. “We’re seeking a public reckoning with not just what is present but what is absent.”

Farber stressed that this project is not about removing monuments. It’s about “what we know and what we believe in today,” he said.

The artists’ work varies in medium and in what issues they address. Hayes’ work addresses gender inequity.

In one city square, artist Kara Crombie installed an interactive boom box sculpture honoring the city’s music history that also asks participants to create their own musical compositions.

In another park, artist Marisa Williamson created a scavenger hunt for people to learn forgotten stories from African-American history.

Elsewhere, artist Karyn Olivier covered a towering sculpture memorializing the 1777 Revolutionary War Battle of Germantown with mirrored plexiglass. Now it reflects the current neighborhood, reminding residents they are the monument’s keepers.

“Monuments only function if we engage them. I asked myself what it means to have a monument that is shrouded and concealed, but in that invisibility you pay attention to it again,” Olivier said. “Monuments should commemorate, celebrate, but they should also make you challenge, investigate and interrogate history.”

Audrey Buglione, who lives a few blocks from the park, visited Olivier’s work recently.

“I’ve walked through this park before and I could not tell you what this monument looked like,” Buglione said. “I like that this is reflexive, representing the community.”

Olivier explained that she’d chosen to cover that specific monument because of its proximity to another which honors German settlers who in 1688 signed the first petition against slavery in the British colonies.

During World Wars I and II, the German surnames at the front base of the statue were covered, Olivier said. Today, the names are visible. There is also a relatively new addition to the monument: “To the memory of the hundreds of thousands of German volunteers in the American wars.”

“It’s amazing to me what fear can do,” Olivier said.

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