



SPIRIT(S) OF PLACE: Autumnal Sculpture Sitings

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SCULPTURE PARKS ARE HARDLY A NEW PHENOMENON: ONE MIGHT EVEN MAKE A CASE FOR THE PYRAMIDS as a precursor. But lately these parks have been proliferating, and Massachusetts boasts some fine ones. There's the DeCordova, in Lincoln. Out west, in the Berkshire town of Stockbridge, is Chesterwood, the former summer home and studio of the turn-of-the-last-century sculptor Daniel Chester French. In Boston, one place you might not think of immediately, is the Forest Hills Cemetery in Jamaica Plain. It is a classic Victorian garden cemetery, with a small but growing contemporary collection.

Each of these established sculpture parks is placing a new emphasis on installing fresh contemporary works onto their grounds. It's reason enough to take a journey outside to see them this autumn before the trees fall bare.

Last spring the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park changed its name to the DeCordova Sculpture Park + Museum. The shift was the idea of director Dennis Kois, who had been on the job less than a year. "We want to be *the* preeminent American sculpture park in a decade," he says.

It's an ambitious goal. But it's already evident in the difference between the four new works added this summer, and the nearly eighty that were already there. Some of the earlier pieces are tame, even decorative. Many are representational, at a time when figurative sculpture is, by and large, at a low point.

Tame is not a term that could be applied to the new additions. Take Steven Siegel's installation, built inside the remains of the foundation of an old barn. Siegel constructed a series of towers, each built of hundreds of newspapers, with ferns and other wild plants growing out of their tops. He's interested in time and place. The newspapers will inevitably decompose over the seasons, returning to earth, which of course is the origin of the trees that make up newsprint. Perhaps other trees will one day grow out of them. The rocks of the decrepit foundation speak of place—and also of the protection they seem to offer to the towers, which they surround.

The first new work visitors see as they enter the DeCordova grounds is Douglas Kornfeld's *Ozymandias*, an eighteen-foot-high red sculpture inspired by Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem of the same name. Kornfeld's version is the universal symbol of a man, the kind used to mark public restrooms. Half-buried in a verdant landscape, it is a contemporary take on Shelley's traveler "in an antique land" who happens upon a broken statue. "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair," was inscribed on the pedestal of the sculpture. The poet didn't have anything playful or humorous in mind. *Playful* could, however, describe Kornfeld's figure, which is almost two-dimensional, like a giant gingerbread man with a round lollipop of a head, listing sideways as it sinks into the ground. Perhaps it's tipsy? The contrast between Shelley's "Ozymandias" and Kornfeld's suggests the contrast between a romantic nineteenth-century vision that looked to the past, and a cyber-fast twenty-first-century culture, dependent on the present because it knows no better.

No one has ever accused Sol LeWitt of being tame. The works of the quintessential minimalist, who died in 2007, start as written instructions that are carried out by his assistants and the institutions that have bought the rights to them. The work at the DeCordova is a sixteen-foot-tall concrete block structure that looks like a model for a stepped skyscraper. The piece is the most austere in the sculpture park, and one of the most successful in its uncompromising authority.



Above: Douglas Kornfeld, *Ozymandias*, 2009, laminated wood and steel. 18' x 18' x 16"

The last of the new works, by Bartow + Metzgar, was still being built when I visited the DeCordova in early August.

In revamping the park, Kois also stresses research and education. At the moment there are two cell phone tours of ten objects each, including artist Jim Dine talking about his huge *Two Big Black Hearts* on the property. One tour is for adults, the other for children. There is also a good brochure and map.

While the weather in a sculpture park is inevitably problematic during a storm, Kois sees the DeCordova's park as a year-round attraction, with visitors on cross-country skis in the winter. "We also offer snowshoes," he says.

The upgrading of the park "is a signal to the world that we are taking our most precious assets seriously," says senior curator Nick Capasso. "We're never going to be the Museum of Fine Arts or the Institute of Contemporary Art, but we have thirty-five acres and they don't."

"We want to become more international," Kois adds. The DeCordova has traditionally been a mostly regional museum. "The most forward-looking work right now is made in England and China, not America." He names British artists Rachel Whiteread and Andy Goldsworthy and China's Ai Weiwei, as the kind of artists whose work he'd like on the

DeCordova grounds. As well as showing international art, Kois wants to attract international audiences. "We're in a few guidebooks," he says "but not enough."

WHILE THE DECORDOVA is after high-profile international sculptors, the twenty artists in this year's *Contemporary Sculpture at Chesterwood* by contrast, are all from the east coast of the US. They were selected from roughly fifty applicants by Denise Markonish, the curator at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), which also has significant outdoor works. Having curated numerous outdoor sculpture shows in her career Markonish created a theme for her exhibition at Chesterwood, because otherwise, such undertakings "can end up as catchalls." The theme, "Space is the Place," comes from a 1974 movie of the same name, by jazz fusion musician Sun Ra. Markonish acknowledges that almost anything

could fit under that title, but says, "It gave the artists something to chew on." She wanted the works to be as site-specific as possible, and the sites at Chesterwood range from a broad swath of lawn to a dark, mysterious woodland path to a dramatic overlook that offers a view of distant hills.

"For me, [outdoor shows] have always been about really opening your eyes to your surroundings," she says. "We tend not to pay attention."

Part of Markonish's job was to award two modest prizes to artists. The winner of the \$1200 Lillian Heller Curator's Award was Pat Brentano Bramnick, while the \$500 Chesterwood Advisory Board Award went to Brian Auwarter. Bramnick's work, *Endangered Birds*, is a series of roughly life-sized silhouettes cut into aluminum panels. Each represents an endangered New England bird species; they are especially poignant because of their placement near that overlook, as if they wanted to fly away to freedom. Auwarter's piece is less emotional and more conceptual. It consists of four bright blue, cube-like structures made of metal screening. They started the Chesterwood season at the outer reaches of the property. Over time, the artist has moved the cubes together, as if they were on a quest for companionship.



Jim Dine, *Two Big Black Hearts*, 1985, bronze, 12 x 12 x 33', at the DeCordova Sculpture Park. Lent by Hamilton Arts, Inc.

AT FOREST HILLS, the first work a visitor encounters after passing through the main gate isn't contemporary. It's *Death Staying the Hand of the Sculptor*, by Daniel Chester French, he of Chesterwood. Also known as the Milmore Memorial, it commemorates the lives of the sculptor Martin Milmore and his stonecutter brother Joseph. To me, this majestic bronze in high relief is the greatest of French's works, although in sheer exposure it can't equal the sculptor's Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. A tense resignation pervades the Milmore piece. The Angel of Death, with huge wings and a sheltering hood, takes the hand of the sculptor to remind him that in the midst of his labor he must be taken away.

While it is tough for a contemporary work to match this masterpiece, there are a few excellent pieces among the more than a dozen recent works at Forest Hills, which began its contemporary program only in 1998, as part of the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the founding of this cemetery that spreads over 250 acres.

Judith Hoos Fox, a member of the board of the Forest Hills Educational Trust and a principal in c² ("curatorsquared," a firm that organizes art exhibitions) says, "The whole reason I joined the board was that I wanted to see that the quality of contemporary grave markers was as good as that of graves 100 years ago." She also points out that the markers of those century-old graves *were* the contemporary art of their day. "The idea is that this is a living place defined by the art of its time, by works connected to a site and an environment.

"I found that in the process of figuring out what is most successful in a site, I always think of scale. At Forest Hills nothing is monumental; everything is on a human scale." That goes for both the Victorian-era pieces and the newer ones. "Design and construction were at a higher level 150 years ago. It would be wonderful if people now could understand that there are many options," she notes, lamenting the poor quality of many of today's grave markers. "One project of the Trust," she goes on, "is to commission a number of artists to come up with markers that could then serve as archetypes."

A trio of twenty-first-century pieces—*Resting Benches* by Lisa Osborn and Danielle Krmar;

Mitch Ryerson's *Poetry Chairs*; and Leslie Wilcox's *Nightshirts*—connect particularly well with their settings. *Resting Benches* is a pair of two child-sized beds with wrinkled linens, uninhabited, as if the children had recently died. They're touching reminders of mortality at any age. They're made of concrete: I wish they'd been carved in stone, which would have made them even more beautiful. Wilcox's signature is empty garments made of metal mesh and wrapped around trees. Her series of clothes at Forest Hills is most effectively sited behind nineteenth-century family graves. It's as if the spirits of the deceased had risen from their tombs and were on their way to heaven—a theme that nicely dovetails with the Milmore Memorial.

The furniture designer Mitch Ryerson made a series of *Poetry Chairs* out of giant tree trunks, split to make a back and a seat, with copper sheets nailed to the wood. The works were a collaboration with poet Elizabeth McKim and children and teachers from the Little House School, during an artist-in-residence program. On the copper are fragments of poems written, Fox says, by the young students. The massive chairs echo the huge trees around them. They're effectively sited around Lake Hibiscus, offering a tranquil place for quiet contemplation. ■

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Lisa Osborn and Danielle Krmar, *Resting Benches*, 2004, cast cement, at Forest Hills Cemetery. Photo: Cecily Miller