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Met Museum Commissions to Bring Contemporary Art Front and Center

With a new wing years away, the Met will highlight cutting-edge art with Nairy Baghramian on its facade and Jacolby Satterwhite in the Great Hall.

By Ted Loos | April 10, 2023



Nairy Baghramian's polychrome sculptures will fill the Fifth Avenue niches of the facade in the fall, and Jacolby Satterwhite will take over the Great Hall with a multimedia installation. Credit...via Nairy Baghramian; Photo by Abigail Enzaldo; via Jacolby Satterwhite and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; Photo by Xavier Scott Marshall

For a contemporary artist, the facade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the walls of its Great Hall are prime real estate for showing work, given the Met's importance and the huge number of visitors it gets (more than 3.4 million in 2022).

Today the museum is announcing new commissions that will take over both spaces in the fall.

The Berlin-based sculptor Nairy Baghramian will make four sculptures for the facade niches along Fifth Avenue as part of her installation "Scratching the Back," on view from Sept. 7 to May 19. From Oct. 2 to Nov. 23, the Great Hall will be filled with works by the Brooklyn-based multimedia artist Jacolby Satterwhite.

Max Hollein, the museum's director, said that the two new commissions — along with the previously announced roof garden project by Lauren Halsey that opens April 18 — reflect the Met's priorities.

"It's about creating opportunities for artists in spaces that are very public, present and accessible," said Hollein, adding that it was part of making contemporary art "front and center in an institution that is bold but also playful."

Though the spaces are highly visible, they are not necessarily easy for an artist to fill. "They are powerful spaces, but challenging," Hollein said. "It's not another white box."

Hollein — who this summer will also become the museum's chief executive — pointed out that the commissions were but one part of the Met's effort to center contemporary art.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

“We’re building a whole new wing for it,” Hollein said of the \$500 million expansion for Modern and contemporary work being designed by the Mexican architect Frida Escobedo. It is slated for completion in 2029.

Baghramian, who was born in Iran, will present abstract, polychrome sculptures, in the niches, that “seem to have washed up like flotsam and jetsam,” the museum said. It will mark her first public art installation in New York City and the fourth in the series of Met facade commissions.

Baghramian won the 2022 Nasher Prize, given by the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, and recently had a show there, “Modèle vivant.”

Hollein is a longtime fan of her work. Her 2021-22 show at Vienna’s Secession exhibition space made a particular impression on him. “I was blown away,” he said. “It was one of the most powerful installations by a sculptor I had seen in a long time.”

The outdoor niches are currently occupied by a show of Hew Locke’s sculptures, “Gilt,” which is up through May 30.

The Great Hall has not had an official commission since the 2019 debut of two large paintings by the Canadian artist Kent Monkman. “It’s not on a schedule,” Hollein said. “We only do the Great Hall when we feel it’s right.”



Jacolby Satterwhite, installation view of “Spirits Roaming on the Earth” at the Miller Institute for Contemporary Art, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pa., 2021. Credit...via Jacolby Satterwhite and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; Photo by Tom Little

Satterwhite is a South Carolina native who was featured in the Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2014, and more recently did a commission for the overhaul of David Geffen Hall at Lincoln Center that debuted in October, a video called “An Eclectic Dance to the Music of Time.”

He will make an elaborate work incorporating video, sound and performative interventions. Some of the animation in the piece will depict objects from the Met’s collection that have been 3-D scanned.

“It will create an immersive narrative that will take you in different directions,” Hollein said.

One of the donors who is contributing to the Satterwhite installation in the Great Hall is Sarah Arison, a museum patron and president of the Arison Arts Foundation.

“It’s a grand, institutional space,” said Arison, who is also a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art and the Aspen Art Museum. “I love that the Met is going to showcase someone young and dynamic there.”