

The New York Times

Sculpture Transplanted to the Gardens

These spaces nudge you toward unexpected art surprises and offer vistas of healing and history.



“Guadalupe Maravilla: Planeta Abuelx,” in Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, Queens. On a recent afternoon, the musician Lia Lungu was making a music video with Maravilla’s piece as backdrop. Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times

By Martha Schwendener, July 1, 2021

Outdoor sculptures provide some of our most accessible encounters with art, and that’s even truer this summer for art viewers who are still hesitant to re-enter galleries and museums, and for those seeking a respite of healing and history.

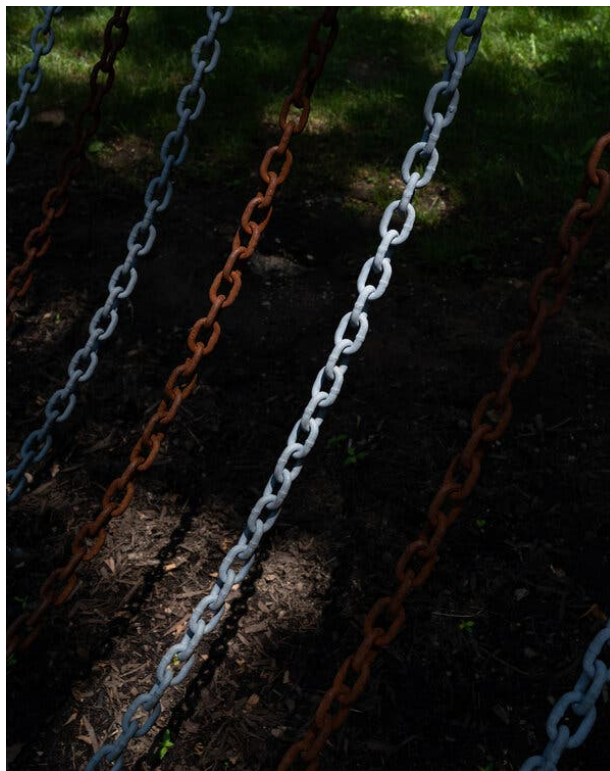
Times critics have already brought to your attention some of the new outdoor additions to the New York cityscape, including David Hammons’s “Day’s End” on the Hudson River, which pays homage to Gordon Matta-Clark’s public sculpture from the ’70s — actually an incision in the wall of a crumbling pier — and more than two dozen projects in Riverside Park, from 64th to 151st Street. And there’s Yayoi Kusama, whose “Cosmic Nature” dots the New York Botanical Garden. Here are others definitely worth a visit.

Melvin Edwards: Brighter Days

Through Nov. 28. City Hall Park, Manhattan; publicartfund.org.



"Song of the Broken Chains" (2020) from "Melvin Edwards: Brighter Days" at City Hall Park. Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times



Detail from the Edwards's work "Homage to Coco" (1970). Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times



Edwards's "Ukpo. Edo," 1992/1996 at City Hall Park. Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times

Melvin Edwards came to prominence as a sculptor with his tough, abstract "Lynch Fragments," begun in 1963. Made with welded-together scraps of metal, the series drew from both African sculpture and European and American modernism, perfectly conveying the awful, violent, twisted nature of its subject matter. "Brighter Days" located in City Hall Park in Lower Manhattan, which is also the site of the 18th-century African Burial Ground, a cemetery where both free and enslaved people were buried, serves as a small survey of Edwards's larger works. The sculptures in "Brighter Days" are less visceral and more monumental than the "Lynch Fragments," resembling the abstract, burnished steel sculptures of David Smith. Some, like "Song of the Broken Chains" (2020), elegantly memorialize the enslaved ancestors. Others, like "Ukpo. Edo" from the '90s refer directly to African precedents. (Ukpo is a dish made in Nigeria with plantains.) Last summer, a few yards from these sculptures, Black Lives Matter activists took over a section of this area, reminding you that the history and struggle Edwards refers to in his sculptures is hardly over.

Guadalupe Maravilla: Planeta Abuelx

Socrates Sculpture Park, 32-01 Vernon Boulevard, Long Island City, Queens; 718-956-1819; socratessculpturepark.org.



Artist-as healer, Guadalupe Maravilla's "Disease Throwers" from "Planeta Abuelx." Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times



Detail from "Disease Throwers." Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times



Medicinal plants and braided wire from “Planeta Abuelx” at Socrates Sculpture Park. Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times

Trauma and healing are central to Guadalupe Maravilla’s work, and his “Planeta Abuelx” at Socrates Sculpture Park takes both a pragmatic and symbolic approach to addressing these themes. “Planeta Abuelx” expands the idea of Mother Earth to a more intergenerational “Grandparents Planet.” The central object here is “Disease Throwers (#13, #14)” from 2021, a towering, twisting sculpture made of cast aluminum and steel tubing with gongs that serve as a kind of head and belly to the pyramid-shaped work. The work is ringed by a temporary garden of medicinal plants, along with squash, beans and corn — vegetables central to the indigenous diet of the Americas — as well as tobacco and roses. Performances in the form of sound baths turn “Disease Throwers” into an actual (hopefully) therapeutic exercise, rather than a merely symbolic one. For Maravilla, this is all personal: He migrated to this country as an unaccompanied minor during the Salvadoran war of the 1980s and later survived colon cancer. Connecting artists, viewers and the landscape, “Planeta Abuelx” is also easily accessible by NYC Ferry on the East River (a few minutes from the Astoria stop), which costs the same as a ride on the subway. The project is one of the best Socrates has presented in recent years.

Christian Boltanski: Animitas

Through Sept. 5. Noguchi Museum, 9-01 33rd Road, Long Island City; 718-204-7088; noguchi.org.



“Christian Boltanski: Animitas” in the garden of Noguchi Museum, an oasis in Long Island City, Queens.
Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times



The bells are interspersed with Noguchi stone sculptures. Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times



Bronze bells with dancing strips of plexiglass twist and turn in the wind, giving the installation movement.
Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times

Just across the street from Socrates, the Paris-born conceptual artist Christian Boltanski has filled the garden of the Noguchi Museum — one of the most beautiful enclosed outdoor spaces in New York — with 180 small bronze bells in his installation “Animitas.” The title refers to the altars that Indigenous natives of Chile put on the side of the roads to honor the dead.

Dangling from the bells are clear plexiglass strips that turn and glisten in the sunlight. Inside the museum you can see a video titled “Animitas, La Forêt des Murmures” (2016) that documents a permanent version of this work on Teshima Island in an inland sea in Japan. Boltanski grew famous in the ’80s for his blurred and haunting photographs of people, especially children, who died in the Holocaust. (His Ukrainian parents were Holocaust survivors.)

“Animitas” has a similarly elegiac quality. Originally installed in Chile, it subtly honored the “disappeared” under the Pinochet regime. The Noguchi’s director, Brett Littman, has stressed placing Isamu Noguchi’s own work in conversation with other artists — just as Noguchi did during his lifetime. This project does that beautifully. “Animitas” is also a perfect counterpoint to Maravilla’s more dramatic installation across the street.

Mary Mattingly: Public WaterThrough

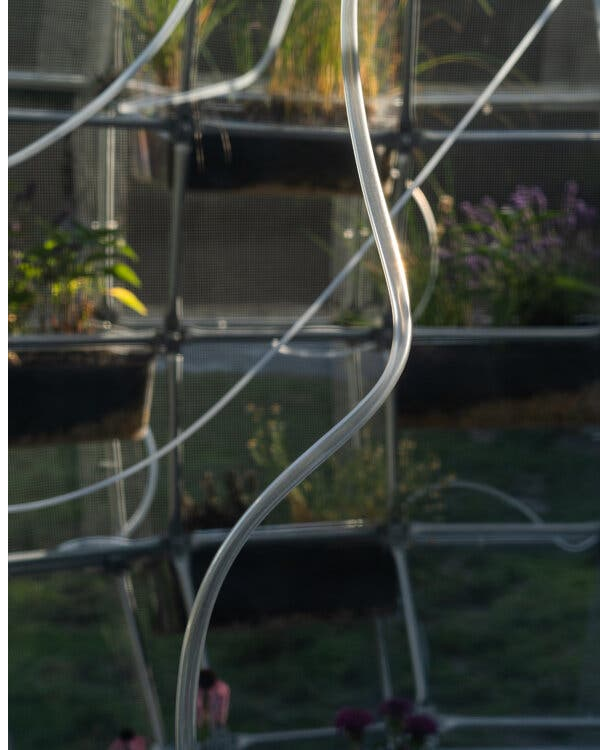
Sept. 7, Prospect Park near Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn. moreart.org.



Geodesic dome in “Mary Mattingly: Public Water” in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times



Plants growing inside the geodesic dome. The system mimics water purification in New York City’s watershed. Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times



Tubing inside the geodesic dome. Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times

Just inside the Grand Army Plaza entrance to Prospect Park sits a clear geodesic structure, encased in wire mesh and filled with plants, tubes and canisters. Mary Mattingly's "Public Water" (2020-2021) clearly borrows from the futuristic modern designs of Buckminster Fuller — father of the geodesic dome — and applies these to contemporary environmental issues, particularly water. The current structure houses plants of our region and simulates, on minuscule scale, what happens up in the Croton, Catskill and Delaware watersheds, where New York City's drinking water originates.

Plants and gravity do the work here, mimicking the purification systems that make our water potable and nourishing. Mattingly is hardly new to thinking about humans and their habitats. This winter and spring, the Brooklyn Public Library hosted an exhibition by Mattingly and the artist Dario Robleto that explored "habitable futures on earth." Similarly, Mattingly's "The Waterpod Project" (2009) was a vessel that sailed around New York Harbor, setting up a kind of low-impact survival module with a geodesic dome as a central feature. Part of what Mattingly brings to the eco-art-conversation is good-looking objects that make you want to participate in salvaging the planet, as opposed to all the seductive objects that wreck it.

Sanford Biggers

Through July 12, 45 Rockefeller Plaza, Manhattan; 212-588-8601; rockefellercenter.com.



“Oracle” by Sanford Biggers at Rockefeller Center. Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times

Holding down the prominent entrance to Rockefeller Center on Fifth Avenue like a solemn sentry, Sanford Biggers’s giant “Oracle” (2021) is both frightening and serene. The 25-foot-tall bronze work is part of Biggers’s “Chimera” series, which looks at different historical, artistic renditions of the body, myths and power. The sculpture clearly draws from the aesthetics of African masks and great African American sculptors like Augusta Savage, but “Oracle” also fuses African and European sculptural traditions. The figure has languorous, drooping eyelids and holds a torch, like the Statue of Liberty. Around the corner are other works in this campuswide installation by Biggers, including a series of blue flags titled “Seigaiha” (2021), which represents the elements of wind and water. (“Seigaiha” is a traditional wave motif that first appeared in Japanese art in the sixth century.) These are a rather slight gesture, compared to “Oracle” — which even comes with a Spotify playlist. Titled “WeAreTheOracle” the tracks include Sabu Martinez’s upbeat, Afro-Cuban jazz piece “The Oracle” and ’70s British funk band Cymande’s “The Message.” Clocking in at nearly five and a half hours, it lets you experience oracular powers long after you have finished viewing Biggers’s monumental sculpture.

Rashid Johnson: Red Stage

Through July 4, Astor Place, Manhattan; creativetime.org.



Jason Moran, the American jazz pianist, was one of the participants taking the stage recently at “Rashid Johnson: Red Stage” in Astor Place, Manhattan. Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times



The Urban Assembly School for the Performing Arts took the red stage, with the dancer Afrika Garry. Credit: Madeline Cass for The New York Times

Rashid Johnson makes monumental sculptures, like one that just appeared in “Grief and Grievance” at the New Museum and consisted of an open-frame shelving structure stuffed with live plants, books, paintings and objects that celebrated African American culture. “Red Stage” at Astor Place is a sculpture with a different approach: It summons participants to take the stage. “This Means You — the Artist, Activist, Rabble-Rouser, Performer, Teacher, Student, Dreamer, Neighbor, and Bystander!” reads the prompt from Creative Time, which commissioned the project.

Thus far, scheduled participants have included Jason Moran, the jazz pianist, as well as students from the Brooklyn School of Music and land acknowledgment ceremonies honoring the Indigenous people who inhabited this region for centuries before colonialism. A Juneteenth celebration of the Emancipation of enslaved Black people had a special lineup, and the July 4 weekend promises the same. That’s when the Jewish radical performer Morgan Bassichis takes the stage, sharing it with Palestinian activists, racial justice workers and others who want to reimagine freedom and the modern nation state. It’s a tall order — but appropriate for a day commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence and encouraging everyone to support other forms of liberty.