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Princeton University Art Museum Gets Six Site-Specific New Works

As the museum's new building nears completion, shadowed by controversy, artists respond with new commissions.

By Hilarie M. Sheets
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The artist Jane Irish and James Steward, the director of Princeton University Art Museum, with Irish's *Cosmos Beyond Atrocity*, 2024. Photo by Joseph Hu

Princeton University has a long history of commissioning public art by the likes of Henry Moore, Louise Nevelson, Alexander Calder and Pablo Picasso, dating back to the 1960s. And when the Princeton University Art Museum opens to the public next year, at almost double the size of its original building, six new large-scale works by women and artists of color will have pride of place — visible beacons near the building's perimeter, both indoors and out at this central crossroads on campus.

The artworks include four site-specific commissions by Diana Al-Hadid, Nick Cave, Jane Irish and Tuan Andrew Nguyen and two acquisitions by Jun Kaneko and Rose B. Simpson.

“From every access point toward the museum, there will be works of public art so that people can almost use them as visual markers of arrival,” James Steward, its director, said.

“I was thinking about how to bring voices that maybe were not yet adequately represented on our campus,” Steward said. The new artworks help “break down the distinctions between indoors and outdoors,” he added, as part of the goal to enhance accessibility and engagement with the museum’s encyclopedic collection, some 115,000 objects. (The institution is renowned for its Chinese paintings, photography and pre-Columbian holdings.)



Tuan Andrew Nguyen, untitled kinetic sculpture, 2024

The 1966 building was demolished in 2021 to make way for the new one. The museum has an annual operating budget of \$29 million (60 percent of which comes from endowment income) and has 120 employees, expected to grow to 180 by the opening in 2025.

The 146,000-square-foot building, which is divided into nine interlocking pavilions for each area of its holdings, will place all of its collection galleries on the second floor, giving them parity. Nearly ignored in Steward’s tour was mention of the new building’s designer, the Ghanaian-British architect David Adjaye, acclaimed for the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Last year, Adjaye was accused of sexual misconduct by three former employees and has stepped back from day to day oversight on several projects.

“We were 50 percent through construction” at the time of the allegations, Steward said. “We were obviously not going to tear the building down and start over again.”

It is credited as an Adjaye Associates project, but Steward said the architect is no longer involved and the remaining work is in the hands of the collaborating architects Cooper Robertson. (Similarly, the Studio Museum in Harlem's new building is nearing completion with Adjaye Associates and Cooper Robertson.) The Shelburne Museum in Vermont, on the other hand, which had hired Adjaye to build its new center for Native American art, had barely begun the design process last year and chose to cut all ties with his firm.

Princeton's building was fully funded — two-thirds by private donors, one-third by the university — before its groundbreaking in 2021. "We have to reclaim our own values that have shaped the project," the director said.

He suggested those values are embedded in the four new artist commissions, which each respond directly to the architecture and the collections.

Cave is scaling up one of his vibrant "Soundsuit" figures to 40 feet tall — it will bow toward arriving visitors as part of a mosaic combining glass, wood and metal that wraps around two walls of the entrance court. The fantastical form will be adorned in a costume of flowers with a halo of spinning tops and globes.



Jun Kaneko, untitled glazed ceramic. Photo by Colin Conces



Rose B. Simpson, *Heights I*, 2022

"I see this figure as the master of ceremonies that will welcome you," said Cave, a Chicago-based artist, who titled his piece "Let me introduce myself. They call me MC, Prince Brighton." A cloudscape with eight Adinkra symbols from West Africa, including ones for unity, peace, truth and courage, surrounds the figure.



Al-Hadid, a Syrian-born, New York-based sculptor, will create a ghostly ziggurat in aluminum rising 15 feet on the East terrace.

“I am interested in the suggestion that this ancient structure might lay stored — in some ways buried — within a very contemporary new building,” she said, explaining that she was inspired by objects in the museum’s collection from near her birthplace in Aleppo and from Turkey.

For a narrow double-height gallery above another entrance, Nguyen has made a 20-foot-high kinetic mobile nodding to Calder. It will dangle over ancient mosaics embedded in the floor from the late 2nd-century A.D., which were discovered during excavations of Antioch in modern Turkey during the 1930s by a Princeton-led team. The polished discs of the mobile are modeled on unexploded ordnance from the Vietnam War that has killed many farmers in the decades since, part of ongoing research by Nguyen, a Vietnam-based visual artist.

“It’s the reincarnation of this bomb material left over from the detritus of war,” said Nguyen, who has designed his sculpture with bells and mallets that will chime in the breeze. “It kind of looks like this rising dragon, responding to the old mosaic of a Medusa on the ground.”

For a small viewing room cantilevered from one of the second-floor pavilions, Irish, who is based in Philadelphia, created “Cosmos Beyond Atrocity,” a Renaissance-style ceiling painting. Inside its architectural coffers, she painted vignettes of violence drawn from the museum’s art collection, including Medea slaying her children, the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, and Judith beheading Holofernes (so much of the Western canon of art is premised on such images). But her ceiling offers a different vision of the cosmos in the center, based on images of pacifism. The trompe l’oeil composition appears to rip open in the middle, revealing an atmospheric sky, populated with figures from the Vietnam antiwar movement in the United States.

Steward thinks that people walking down the sidewalk “will see this gloriously colored ceiling and want to discover what it is.”

He said he hoped the day would come eventually when the role that Adjaye played in the design of the building could be discussed without tainting the project.

“As a culture, we’re going to have to grapple more successfully with how we deal with the maker versus the work,” Steward said.

“If we were to apply the standards of today to the art of the past, our galleries would probably be decimated.”

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