

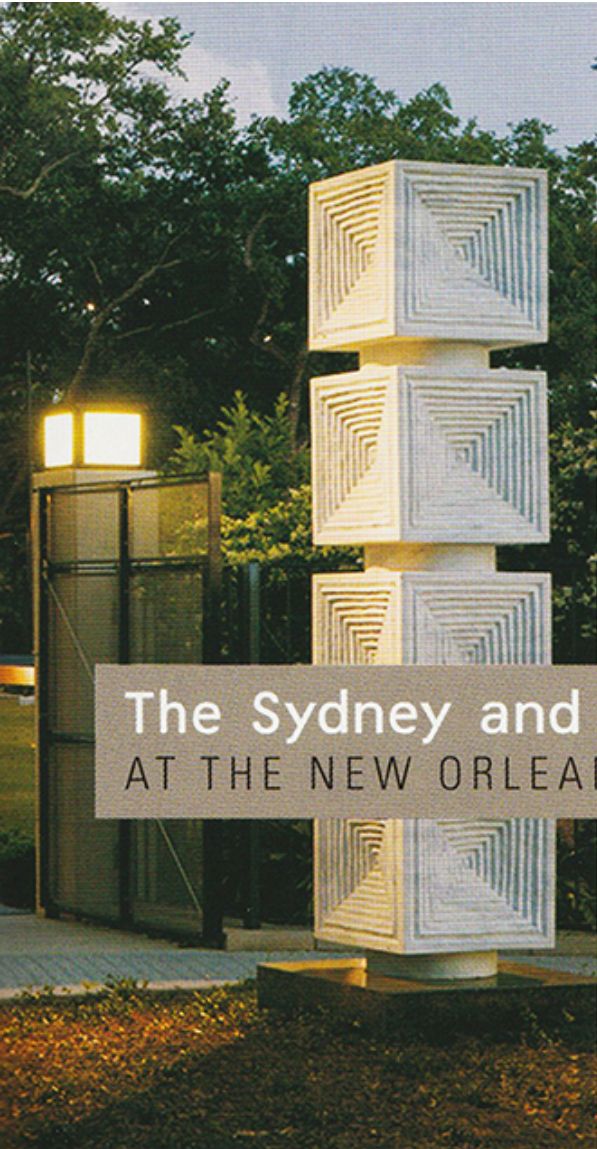


The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden

AT THE NEW ORLEANS MUSEUM OF ART

ART SPACES





MIRANDA LASH

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### Sydney and Walda Besthoff

Known as connoisseurs of modern and contemporary sculpture, Sydney and Walda Besthoff founded their Garden for the aim of allowing the public to enjoy art in a contemplative and idyllic Louisiana environment. Both lifelong New Orleanians, for many decades the Besthoffs have been (and continue to be) important business and cultural leaders in New Orleans. Sydney Besthoff served as chairman and CEO of the family-owned retail drugstore chain K & B (Katz and Besthoff) Incorporated, which his grandfather founded in 1905. After an extensive period of expansion under Sydney Besthoff's direction, K & B was sold to the Rite Aid Corporation in 1997. Sydney Besthoff has served on the boards of numerous business and arts organizations and was a founder of the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) of New Orleans. Walda Besthoff maintains an enduring commitment to the performing arts as a performer, staffer, and patron. She has served on numerous boards, including at the CAC and NOMA.

The Besthoffs' interest in collecting sculpture began in 1973. That year they acquired an office building

at Lee Circle in New Orleans to serve as the corporate headquarters for K & B Incorporated. The Chicago architectural firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill had designed the building in 1961 for John Hancock Insurance. For the large plaza surrounding the building, the architects commissioned an eighteen-foot-high granite fountain by Isamu Noguchi, *The Mississippi*, 1961–62. Water is meant to spill from the fountain's crescent-shaped top, alluding to the Mississippi River's role in shaping New Orleans into the Crescent City. Unfortunately, when the Besthoffs purchased the building, Noguchi's water feature was not functioning. Sydney Besthoff's subsequent investigation into the fountain's repair sparked his enduring interest in the mechanics of sculpture.

With the Noguchi restored, the Besthoffs commissioned their first work of art, George Rickey's *Four Open Rectangles Excentric, Square Section*, 1978, after consulting E. John Bullard, then the new director of NOMA. The museum owned a small example of Rickey's work, and Rickey (who taught at Newcomb College at Tulane

← Sydney and Walda Besthoff,  
2010

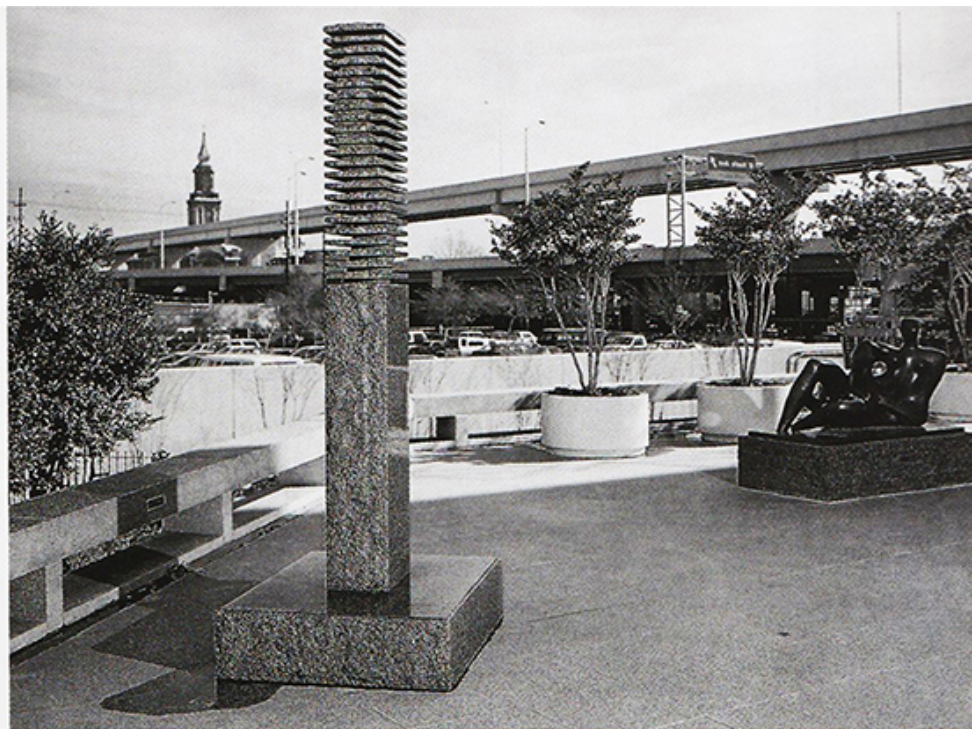






University from 1955 to 1962) sent Sydney Besthoff 8mm films of his sculptures in motion. Interested in these kinetic features, Sydney purchased a second work by Rickey, *Four Lines Oblique*, 1973–77, which is now in his namesake Garden. In 1977, the Besthoffs established the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Foundation (also known as the Virlane Foundation, after their three daughters Virginia, Jane, and Valerie). Thereafter, the growth of their modern and contemporary collection accelerated. They installed numerous large-scale works on the building's plaza and displayed smaller sculptures and paintings throughout their corporate headquarters.

Among the Besthoffs' earliest sculpture acquisitions were works by some of the most important sculptors of the twentieth century, including Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and Jacques Lipchitz. The Besthoffs traveled extensively in Europe and encountered work by British, Italian, and, of particular interest, French artists. As Walda Besthoff explains, "The New Orleans Museum of Art has a fantastic collection of nineteenth-century French paintings, and we wanted the continuity of the French feel. We are the only European city in America."<sup>1</sup>



As their preferences evolved, the Besthoffs also sought the work of younger artists such as Saint Clair Cemin, Rona Pondick, and Jean-Michel Othoniel. "When we first started collecting," Walda Besthoff recalls, "we were not sure of ourselves, so we bought names. We bought things we thought were fairly classic. As time

<sup>1</sup>Jesús Moroles, *Las Mesas Bench*, 1989, and Henry Moore, *Reclining Mother and Child*, 1975

→ Preliminary concept plan for the Garden, 1998

*Following pages:*

*(left)* Design drawing for the Lagoon, 1998

*(right)* Design drawing for the Cascade Pool, 1998

went on we became more aware of who was producing what and we let our own taste govern what we were buying.”<sup>2</sup> Sydney Besthoff agrees, “We zero in on particular artists, rather than use a scattershot approach.”<sup>3</sup>

After several decades of collecting, K & B Headquarters boasted a broad and impressive selection of twentieth-century art, which remains open for public viewing. In addition to sculpture, the Besthoffs became avid collectors of American photorealist painting, acquiring important works by Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, and Robert Cottingham.



abstraction becomes apparent, one that emphasizes a dialogue between positive and negative space, and focuses on curvilinear forms over geometric angularity. Moore and Hepworth were friends and classmates. They met in 1919, and both studied at Leeds School of Art and later at the Royal College of Art in London. While Hepworth became known in the early twentieth century for sculpting in an almost entirely abstract manner, Moore became famous for his biomorphic figures. The holes and concavities in Hepworth's *River Form*, 1965, evoke the movement of water through sedimentary stones. In his *Reclining Mother and Child*, Moore revisits one of his preferred subjects: maternity. The design for this work was likely influenced by his time sketching pre-Columbian art in the British Museum as a young artist. Coming from a younger generation, Lynn Chadwick was inspired by Moore's use of figural abstraction. However, his *Sitting Figures (2)*, 1979–80, with ominously blank square faces, convey a sharpness and planarity in contrast to Moore.

### Surrealism

Famous for its tendency towards the fantastical and extreme, New Orleans seems an appropriate home for works with a Surrealist tendency. René Magritte's *The Labors of Alexander*, 1967, creates a riddle through the juxtaposition of objects, as is typical of his work. The root of a tree stump extends over an ax, leading the viewer to question which object has triumphed in this situation: the ax or tree? Originally based on a painting with the same nonsensical title, *The Labors of Alexander* was posthumously cast in bronze. Magritte was directly associated with the Surrealists, beginning in Paris during the 1920s. Meanwhile Louise Bourgeois, whose works also carry a Surrealist element, worked for forty years in obscurity. Her imposing *Spider* is one of a series of arachnids associated with the artist's mother. Descending from a family of weavers, Bourgeois explains, "My best friend was my mother and she was...dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat, and as useful as a spider."<sup>13</sup>

The influence of Surrealism continues to surface in contemporary art as in Rona Pondick's *Monkeys*,

← Lynn Chadwick, *Sitting Figures (2)*, 1979–80





1998–2001. Pondick explores the theme of hybridity by melding casts of her own hands and face to a gleaming tangle of monkeys. Though often associated with the controversies surrounding human evolution and genetic manipulation, Pondick also relates her *Monkeys* to Franz Kafka's 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis*.

### Italian Art after World War II

The Italian artists in the Garden demonstrate the diversity of styles to emerge from Italy after World War II. In 1947, Pietro Consagra, inspired by artists such as Constantin Brancusi and Pablo Picasso, helped found the group Forma I, which emphasized both formalism and Marxism. Consagra's *Conversation with the Moon*, 1960, reflects his interest in working in layers of low relief, emphasizing the frontality of the sculpture. Consagra was associated with the Continuità group, founded in 1961 as an outgrowth of Forma I. Arnaldo Pomodoro, also a member of Continuità, similarly promoted the importance of abstraction. His piece *A Battle: For the Resistance Fighters*, 1971, which depicts an overturned

obelisk crushing its base, was commissioned by the city of Modena as a memorial to the resistance fighters of World War II.

Out of the 1960s also came the Arte Povera movement, which advocated for a "poor" art of basic materials—twigs, stone, glass, and fabric, and a more conceptual and experimental approach to art making. Luciano Fabro's *The Day Weighs on My Night, V*, 2000, highlights both the raw and carved quality of marble stone. Meanwhile, abstaining from any specific movement was Giacomo Manzù, a devoutly Catholic artist. His streamlined and impassive *Large Seated Cardinal*, 1983, is a typical example of his focus on religious themes and personages.

← Rona Pondick, *Monkeys*,  
1998–2001