

THE SYDNEY AND WALDA BESTHOFF SCULPTURE GARDEN





The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden at the New Orleans Museum of Art

MIRANDA LASH

New Orleans Museum of Art
in association with Scala Publishers

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Foreword

Since its establishment in 2003, the internationally acclaimed Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden has been celebrated for its remarkable examples of twentieth and twenty-first-century sculpture. Thanks to the generosity of its founding patrons, as well as other donors who have followed the Besthoffs' lead, the collection continues to grow with a vision that remains adventurous and inspired. From 2010 to 2011 alone, three works have been acquired, including the classically influenced figure of *Diana* by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, an abstract, *Untitled* by Anish Kapoor, and the most recent, *Karma*, by Do-Ho Suh, which probes the relationship of the individual to the community. Such additions represent the extraordinary range of works comprising the collection.

The backdrop to these important works of art—the Garden's uniquely Southern landscape—has continued to flourish as well. After considerable damage by Hurricane Katrina, the Garden's grounds were restored to a place of reflection and rejuvenation for the community.

Yet, just as significant as the growth of its collection and its landscape is the growing role of the Garden as a locus for cultural activity in New Orleans. Theatrical productions, film screenings, musical events, and more have brought thousands of people together to celebrate the arts in the context of the Garden's impressive collection and gracious setting. As the museum follows its mission of serving as a cultural crossroads for the city of New Orleans and the Gulf South, the Sculpture Garden is a vital part of that goal.

It is in the wake of this emerging role for the Garden that I am pleased to introduce this catalogue. With sixty-three entries, covering all works in the Garden as of fall 2011, *The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden at the New Orleans Museum of Art* is the most comprehensive investigation to date into this diverse grouping of outdoor works. This volume is the latest in a series of scholarly books produced by NOMA, designed to promote the strengths of this museum's collection and shed new light on its objects.

I wish to thank the catalogue's editor and contributing author Miranda Lash, NOMA's curator of modern and contemporary art, for guiding this publication from inception to completion. Her introductory essay, "A Public Paradise," outlines the history of the Garden and its collection, from its genesis with the Besthoffs to its successful recovery after Hurricane Katrina, as well as presenting highlights and groupings in the collection. I am grateful to the contributing authors for their insightful entries on the collection. My thanks also goes to Pamela Buckman, Sculpture Garden Manager, for her contributions on the plant life of the Garden.

Born and nurtured under the generosity of two remarkable patrons, the Garden owes its existence to the vision of Sydney and Walda Besthoff. Having overseen every stage of this Garden's growth, it was also the Besthoffs' desire that the art historical value

of the Garden be documented in two publications: a portable guide published in 2011 as part of Scala's Art Spaces series, and this large-scale hardcover book. We thank the Besthoffs for their support of the Garden as well as for their sponsorship of this publication, which will be a reference for years to come.

The Garden also owes a great deal to E. John Bullard, Director Emeritus of the New Orleans Museum of Art, who enthusiastically supported the Garden from the initial discussions between NOMA, City Park, and the Besthoffs. We are grateful to John for successfully opening the Garden during his tenure and for remaining committed to re-opening the Garden following Hurricane Katrina. His recollections in this publication detail the early efforts of NOMA and the Besthoffs to establish the Garden and make it a beloved space for all New Orleanians.

The Garden also benefited from donations of works of art and funds for acquisitions from collectors in addition to the Besthoffs. I wish to acknowledge the generosity of the family of Fritz Bultman, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation, Muriel Bultman Francis, John W. Lolley, Dr. and Mrs. Herbert Kaufman, a purchase in memory of Richard Koch, Susan P. and Louis K. Meisel, the River Branch Foundation, Mrs. P. Roussel Norman (and gifts from her family and friends), Nancy L. Rosenblum, the Edgar Stern Family, the Frederick R. Weisman Foundation, and a gift in memory of Mignon McClanahan Wolfe.

Many exceptional donors have sponsored the construction and maintenance of the Garden. In addition to the Besthoffs, I wish to particularly acknowledge the State of Louisiana, the Azby Fund, the Collins C. Diboll Foundation, and the Ella West Freeman Foundation for their essential support of the Garden's construction. We are also grateful to the Garden's Fellows (see pages 6–7), and to the Getty Foundation for their commitment to restoring the Garden's endangered live oaks and shrubs. We also wish to thank the National Endowment for the Arts for their generous support towards this publication.

As is the case with any attempt to document a vibrant, growing collection, this book can only provide a snapshot of the Sculpture Garden at this particular moment in time. We look forward to the changes the coming years will bring, both to the collection and to the Garden's continually evolving role as a center for art and culture in New Orleans.

SUSAN M. TAYLOR

The Montine McDaniel Freeman Director

New Orleans Museum of Art

A Public Paradise

MIRANDA LASH

In 2003, the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) inaugurated the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden. The nearly five-acre Garden, adjacent to the Museum in City Park, opened with fifty works of art by modern and contemporary artists of international renown, including Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, George Segal, and Louise Bourgeois. Its sculptures are installed in an expansive natural setting amongst meandering footpaths, reflecting lagoons, live oaks, mature pines, and magnolias. The first years of the Garden's existence witnessed a spectrum of events, including the struggle and recovery following Hurricane Katrina. Today the Garden boasts sixty-four works of art (a number which continues to grow), and is widely recognized as one of the foremost sculpture gardens in the United States. Its design has earned awards from the American Society of Landscape Architects in 2006, and the American Institute of Architects in 2007.

SYDNEY AND WALDA BESTHOFF

Known as connoisseurs of modern and contemporary sculpture, Sydney and Walda Besthoff founded their garden with 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 was founded by his grandfather 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. Like her husband 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. Noguchi designed his *Mississippi* specifically for this site, with its fluted structure echoing the nearby classical column in Lee Circle, upon which Civil War general Robert E. Lee stands. Water is meant to spill from its 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.



SYDNEY AND WALDA BESTHOFF





Aerial view of the Garden

With the Noguchi restored, the Besthoffs commissioned their first work of art, George Rickey's *Four Open Rectangles Excentric, Square Section*, 1978, after consulting with 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 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." 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 went on we became more aware of who was producing what and we let our own taste govern what we were buying.”² Sydney Besthoff agrees: “We zero in on particular artists, rather than use a scattershot approach.”³

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 the sculpture, the Besthoffs became avid collectors of American photorealist painting, acquiring important works by Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, and Robert Cottingham.



Pondick cites Franz Kafka's 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis*, wherein Gregor Samsa awakes one morning from "uneasy dreams" to find himself transformed into a bug as an inspiration.⁷ *Monkeys* shares Kafka's grim sense of humor and the horror that comes not from the monstrous change, but "the perfect sanity," with which Gregor and Pondick's heads consider their position, logically and stoically.⁸ As she states "[f]ear and desire are two words I've always thought of to describe my work."⁹

S. H.

1 Octavio Zaya, "Rona Pondick: The Metamorphosis of an Object Marker," *Flash Art* (March–April 2002): 77.

2 Ibid.

3 Janet Koplos, "Rona Pondick: Orchestrated Obsessions," *Art in America* 90, no. 2 (September 2002): 119.

4 Zaya, "Rona Pondick," 77.

5 George Fifield, "Rona Pondick's Monsters and Fears and Desire," *Sculpture* 22, no. 7 (2003), 35.

6 Zaya, "Rona Pondick," 77.

7 Franz Kafka, *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1995), 89.

8 Nancy Princenthal, "A Dreamlike Melding of Human, Beast and Steel," *The New York Times*, April 7, 2002.

9 Fifield, "Rona Pondick's Monsters and Fears and Desire," 37.

Rona Pondick

AMERICAN, 1952

Monkeys, 1998–2001

STAINLESS STEEL

41 1/4 X 66 X 85 1/2 INCHES

GIFT OF SYDNEY AND WALDA BESTHOFF, 2003.84

Seen from a distance, Rona Pondick's *Monkeys* could be a group of happy primates. Yet interspersed among the quicksilver mammals are two human faces plastered on monkey-sized heads and human arms, anchoring the playful creatures to the ground like a stoic warning. Simultaneously hilarious, beautiful, and upsetting, Pondick's piece pushes the viewer to what the artist describes as "a kind of emotional and psychological state that makes you aware of your own body."¹

Monkeys is the largest piece from Pondick's series of animal-human hybrids. The artist sees her work as a continuation of cultural and historical hybrids that descend from Egyptian hieroglyphs and other classical mythology. She also cites the *Caprichos*, Francisco Goya's eighteenth-century etchings that criticized Spanish society and featured many human-animal combinations, as an inspiration.

From conception to completion, *Monkeys* took five years with the assistance of the Polich Art Works in Rock Tavern, New York. It was the last sculpture to be finished of its group and the most difficult to cast. Pondick sculpted the animal forms by hand, but had her own head cast digitally to allow it to be altered in size while maintaining detail and proportion. The digital file of the artist's head was so large that it crashed the computer for a year. This balance of technology and traditional sculpting embodies the sculpture's theme, testing the line between natural and synthetic.

Monkeys is cast in stainless steel, a medium difficult to manipulate and polish. Yet despite its rigidity, the animals are lifelike, mirroring the fluid style of the Baroque sculpture of Gian Lorenzo Bernini.² The manipulation of steel and its juxtaposition with matte human parts emphasizes the mutability of evolution and fragility of life.³ The monkeys are smooth and idealized while the human features are notable for their every outlined pore and line. The creatures manifest our worst fears about mutation and scientific monsters with one monkey-human hand raised into a fist.⁴

Pondick, born in Brooklyn in 1952, received her B.A. from Queens College in New York. She studied with the Minimalist sculptor Richard Serra at Yale University's M.F.A. program. Pondick's sphinx-like hybrids mark a shift from the artist's previous works, which utilized the repetition of fetishistic objects like high-heels, nipples, and teeth to create funny and frightening pieces reminiscent of a Freudian nightmare. She has always sculpted fragments, disseminating mouths made of chewing gum and wax teeth and baby bottles in a gallery to surreal effect.⁵ In contrast, *Monkeys* is self-contained and focused on clean and smooth textures. The primates "claim their physical spaces like animals that are territorial."⁶