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Massive metal sculptures transform an old memorial on the Schuylkill

Maren Hassinger's "Steel Bodies" exhibit takes over the Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial through November 12.



Travis Johnson with Atelier Fine Art Services welding the piece titled Vessel 10 from Maren Hassinger's "Steel Bodies" exhibit at the Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial on Kelly Drive. Photographs from installation on Wednesday, June 7, 2023. ... Read more Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

By Rosa Cartagena

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On a hazy Wednesday the first week of June, a small team of welders were hard at work by the Schuylkill. Large metal sculptures scattered along grassy patches beside the busy Kelly Drive road, waited for their stage placement.

Travis Johnson, in a welding helmet and neon orange long sleeve, was reassembling a stainless steel sculpture that had been split in three pieces to travel the hundred mile journey from New York to a site under the Girard Avenue Bridge. As head of operations at Atelier Art Services, he was leading a five-man team to install the new exhibit *Steel Bodies* from sculptor Maren Hassinger.

Ten stainless and carbon steel sculptures comprise the installation, reaching up to 11 feet tall and weighing between 150-350 pounds. The vessels, as Hassinger calls them, are skeletal structures that viewers can see through and walk around.

"They frame something you may never have noticed, and can call your attention to details around you," said Hassinger, whose exhibit came to Philadelphia through the Association for Public Art. "That would be a very good thing, because generally, we do not pay enough attention to number one, who we are, and number two, where we are."



Vessel 9 in the Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial along Kelly Drive.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Steel Bodies has landed in a somewhat unusual location for a public art exhibit — atop a terraced memorial more than 60 years old. The Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial was completed over a span of 30 years, between the 1930s to 1960s, to host 17 sculptures and three terraces on the east bank of the Schuylkill. It depicts the history of American settlement and the country's founding, with bronze and granite sculptures of stereotypical figures intended to represent the nation, like "The Immigrant," "The Slave," and "The Quaker." These sculptures largely dismiss the roles of Black Americans, people of color, and women in building this country.

Though there's a lovely river view, the memorial isn't exactly a popular destination. That's part of why the association, which owns the memorial and is dedicated to making Philly a museum without walls, wanted to bring a public art installation to the overlooked site.



Hassinger's Vessel 4. Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Now through November 12, Hassinger's metal sculptures pepper the terraces, some serving as fountain centerpieces and others standing next to the memorial sculptures. One vessel even hangs from a wire between two trees, suspended in air and swaying in the wind. Others sit on bases, partially there to protect the metal pieces from the stone terrace floor, but more importantly to fend off potential climbers.

"People are gonna climb on there, it's just gonna happen," said Johnson. "The reason we put the bases up high is so we can try to avoid that as much as possible."

But, he says, the welding work is strong and built to last. He'll still drive by over the next few months to make sure everything is still in place.



Hassinger's Vessel 7 sits at the center of a fountain in the memorial.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Johnson and his team worked with engineers, curators, the association, and the artist to identify the best places for each sculpture. It took them five days to place the 10 vessels safely and securely.

Two sculptures were split apart for transport and reassembled on site, while others were placed on bases. Back in the exhibit's first location, New York's Socrates Sculpture Park, the vessels mostly stood on grass. At the memorial, bases help keep the artworks in place and prevent the hard stone from harming the metal.



Vessel 5 hangs by a cable strung up between trees.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Some sculptures look like perfume bottles or vases. Hassinger says the shapes are random, springing from ordinary objects she might have in her home.

This installation follows Hassinger's gallery exhibit "We Are All Vessels," where she created five pieces to represent a shared humanity and equality, with the message: "We are ALL vessels capable of compassion."



Theo Mullen with Atelier Fine Art Services working on Vessel 1.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Her sculptures have long examined how humanity relates to the natural world; she's spent more than four decades focused on the environment. "It's this thing about recalling a kind of loss — if you want to be really dramatic and romantic about it, it's a permanent loss of the natural past," Hassinger said.

On her first visit to the site, Hassinger said it seemed bleak next to an endless road of traffic. "In a way there are three rivers," she said. "There's the water river, there's this river of monuments that have been created, and there's this river of traffic."



Terrell Wilson with Tradesman International securing Vessel 2 into place on a pedestal he fabricated for this sculpture. Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Yet, Hassinger believes *Steel Bodies* could make the space more comfortable for visitors. Joggers, cyclists, those on their little mental health walks, or anyone else who may have normally sped by, may consider stopping at some point this summer to take in the views through her vessels.



Travis Johnson with Atelier Fine Art Service working on Hassinger's Vessel 8. Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer
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