

The Philadelphia Inquirer

# LIFE & CULTURE



Travis Johnson with Atelier Fine Art Services welds "Vessel 10" from Maren Hassinger's "Steel Bodies" exhibit along Kelly Drive. Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

## Old memorial hosts new exhibit

**Metal sculptures will be in place until November at the Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial.**

By Rosa Cartagena  
Staff Writer

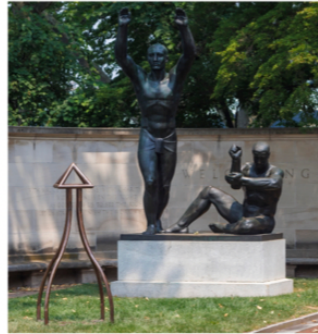
On a hazy Wednesday the first week of June, a small group of welders were hard at work by the Schuykill. Large metal sculptures were scattered along grassy patches beside the busy Kelly Drive road, waiting for their placement.

Travis Johnson, in a welding helmet and neon orange long sleeve, was reassembling a stainless steel sculpture that had been split into 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 Fine 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 each. 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."

"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 Schuykill. 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 depict the roles of Black Americans, people of color,



Hassinger's "Vessel 4," placed near two of the memorial's bronze and granite sculptures, intended to represent the nation's founding.

and women in building this country. Through there's a lovely river view, the memorial isn't exactly a popular destination. That's part of the reason why the association, which owns the memorial and is dedicated to making Philly a museum without walls, wanted to bring in a public art installation.

Now through Nov. 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, suspended between two trees and swaying in the wind. Others sit on bases partially to keep the metal pieces in place and protect them

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 drive by over the next few months to make sure everything is still in place.

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 Soocrates Sculpture Park, the vessels mostly stood on grass.

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

The installation follows Hassinger's gallery exhibit "We Are All Vessels," where she created five pieces



Installation of "Vessel 10." The exhibit runs through Nov. 12.



Theo Mullen with Atelier Fine Art Services works on "Vessel 1"

to represent a shared humanity and equality, with the message: "We are ALL vessels capable of compassion."

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."

Yet, Hassinger believes "Steel Bodies" could make the space more comfortable for visitors. Joggers, cyclists, walkers, or anyone else who may have normally sped by, may consider stopping to take in the views through her vessels.

cartagena@inquirer.com  
Rosa Cartagena