
A BRIDGE BETWEEN ART & THE COMMUNITY

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MINNEAPOLIS - How can a museum reach out to its community? Well, if it's the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, it creates a 7 1/2-acre public sculpture park; keeps it open free of charge every day from 6 a.m. to midnight; builds a tropical conservatory within it, where garden-goers can warm their hands in winter between bouts of looking at the art; and erects a dazzling pedestrian bridge spanning a highway that cuts off the garden from the city center.

That 375-foot bridge is by a local artist -- who just happens to be Siah Armajani, one of the country's most celebrated and adventurous public art makers. The Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge, as it's officially called, links the Walker to the rest of the city both spiritually and physically. Its form has an almost Mozartean grace, and its two long, swooping curves -- one arching up, the other sinking down -- resemble phrase marks in a musical score. The grace notes are the ramps leading down from it. The one on the sculpture garden side goes wild, with a series of angles and arcs that keep you -- in the most delightful way -- from a straight and narrow path. Best of all, the teal- and cream-colored footbridge is on a human scale, which the highways definitely are not. Walking across the footbridge, you feel almost giddy, as if you're flying above all those gas-guzzling, exhaust-spewing cars below.

For all its prominence, Armajani's bridge is only the second-most visible piece of art in the garden. First honors go to Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's "Spoonbridge and Cherry," which has become a virtual symbol of Minneapolis, its wit and warmth contradicting the city's famous chill. The bowl of the mega-spoon plops down in a little pond. At the very top of the spoon is a ripe red cherry, ready to roll. It's hard not to laugh when you first spy "Spoonbridge."

The Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, as the Walker's outdoor extension is called, is a felicitous collaboration of the museum, which provides the art and the art expertise, and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, which provides maintenance and security. (And does it well. During three days of visiting, I didn't see as much as a gum wrapper's worth of litter.) The garden is a glorious example of making something out of a "nothing" urban space. An Armory once stood here, but it was on the verge of sinking into the peat bog and quicksand underneath when it was finally dynamited, in 1953.

Although the sculpture garden was opened just two years ago, it has become a major tourist attraction, and a Walker curator laments, in jest, that now the many tour buses parked in front of the garden leak oil onto the pavement -- which was designed by the distinguished minimalist Sol LeWitt. A series of granite blocks actually set into the street, the LeWitt, like the Armajani bridge, performs a "linking" function: The pavement spanning the street between the Walker and the garden tells you in visual terms that the two go together.

The design of the sculpture garden is a surprise. Unlike most of the other public parks in Minneapolis, which are naturalistic and flowing, in the Olmsted style, and unlike most other contemporary sculpture gardens, which tend toward the rolling-hills-romantic, the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden is laid out in a formal grid. It resembles a Renaissance garden. Its arborvitae hedges will one day make solid walls between rectangular outdoor "rooms." There are long, straight allees that offer choice views of distant statues. The garden's master plan is by architect Edward Larrabee Barnes, who also designed the Walker's building; landscape architects Peter Rothschild, Michael Van Valkenburgh and Barbara Stauffacher Solomon collaborated on the project.

There are about 40 works of art in the garden, and the selection reflects the Walker's commitment to art of our time. Although some works date to early in the century, most of the work -- and the most interesting work -- is from the last decade. Many of the greatest names in contemporary sculpture are represented here: George Segal, Ellsworth Kelly, Martin Puryear and Deborah Butterfield among them. Jackie Ferrara's "Belvedere" flirts with the boundary VYfk YYb gW`dhi fY`UbX`UFVW`jH`Vfi fY`<Yf`ZJa`]]UF`c`f]hcbH`ghUW`g`YfY`UXX`i`d`hc`U`a`i`W`!`i`gYX`d`U`h`z`fa`z`VYbVW`Yg`UbX`fccZYgg`fcc`" `>`X]h`G`YUfj`K`]h`ci`h`K`cfXg`"]g`Ub`Ya`dhmVfcbnY`W`Uhz`U`a`UFV`Y`YUX`h`Uha`][`h`h`Uj`Y`VYYb`Vfc`Yb`cZZ`U`WUgg]W`" ghUj`Yz`UbX`Ub`Ufa`Yggz`YUX`Yggz`Zfa`UY`hcfgc`" 5`" h`fY`Y`Ya`Ybfg`UFY`a`i`h`UbX`U`Ui`bh]b[`"

H`Y`bUa`Yg`cZA`]bbYUdc`]gfizfghZJa`]Yg`UFY`U`gc`]b`h`Y` [`UFXYb`z`cb`Xc`b`f`d`Uei`Yg`" H`]g`]g`U`W`h`k`]h` `Ub`Ughcb]g`]b`]bi`a`VYf`cZ`W`"Y`W`c`fg`cZA`U`cf`W`bhYa`dcfUfm`Uf`h`UbX`h`cgY`W`"Y`W`c`fg`U`Uj`Y`Ub`Yei`U`m`Ughcb]g`]b`]V`ta`a`]ha`Ybh`hc`h`Y`W`ta`a`i`b]m`" @YUX]b[`h`Y`"]gh`UFY`>`Xm`UbX`?`YbbYh` `8`Unfcbz`cZ`h`Y` `8`Unfcb`<`i`Xgcb`XYdUfha`Ybhg`cfY`Z`fh`bYz`k` `c` `U`Y`Y`XcbU`h`Y`hc`h`Y` [`UFXYb`]UF`Y`k`cf`g`Vm`5bh`cbm`7Ufc`F`]W`UFX`GHU`_]Yk`]W`Z`A`UF`_ `X`]Gi`j`Yfc`UbX`F`]W`UFX`GYffU`"

H`Y`cbY`h`]b[`Y`Yfmc`bY`_`bck`g`UVci`h`A`]bbYUdc`]g`]g`h`Uh`]fj`W`" H`Y`dUf`_]b[` `ch`i`gYX`Vmi`h`Y`K`U`_`Yf`UbX`]hg`bY`][`V`cfz`h`Y` ;`i`h`f`Y`h`YUH`fz`]g`cb`h`Y`ZUf`g`XY`cZ`h`Y`gW`dhi`fY` [`UFXYb`" `Cb`U` :`VYfi`Uf`mY`]Yb`]b[`z`h`Y`k`U`_`Z`ca`h`Y`" `ch`hc`h`Y`" `a`i`gYi`a` `a`][`h`VY`Ybci` [` `h` `h` `fb`d`Ycd`Y`]b`hc`]W`" ghUj`Yg`" <`YbW`" h`Y`GU`]Y`UbX`> `c` `b` `7`ck`Yg`7`cbgYfj`U`h`c`f`m`z`k` `]W`z`]b`UXX`]h`cb`hc`VY`]b[`U`" `c`j`Y`m` [`Ugg`V`i`]X`]b[`z`k`Ug`d`UW`X`gc`]h`W`i` `X`gYfj`Y`Ug`Ub`]b`Xccf`k`U`_`k`Um`Z`ca` `dUf`_]b[` `ch`hc` `a`i`gYi`a` " `>`b`Cej`Ya`VYfz`k` `Yb` `=j`]g`]h`Xz`]h`k`Ug`Z` `YX`k`]h` `VUb`_g`cZ`W`fmg`Ub`h`Ya`i`a`g`]b`g`U`XYg`cZ` [`c`Xz`fi`gh`UbX`fYXz`gYdUfUH`X`Vm`j`Y`]g`cZA`UXU` [`Ug`W`f`>`Uga`]b`Y`W`ja`V`]b[` `cb`k`]fY`k`U`_`g`" `5`bX`h`YfY`k`YfY`UfW`k`Um`g`W`ta`d`Yh`m`W`j`YfYX`k`]h` `W`Y`Yd`]b[`Z` [`z`k`]h` `k` `]h`Y` [`UFXYb`]Ug`d`Ub`h`X`Uh`h`Y`]f`VUgY`" <`i` [`Y`h`ffU`W`h`U`d`c`hg` `Y`X` `cf`Ub` [`Y`h`Y`Y`g`h`Uha`UXY`h`Y`d`UW`" `cc`_`!!` `UbX`ga`Y`" `!!` `]_`Y`h`Y`Yi`h`Uj`U`]Ub`h`cf`Ub` [`Yf`]g`cZ`9i` fcd`Y`Ub`d`U`UW`g`"

The towering center court of the conservatory is planted with palm trees that seem utterly improbable in this climate. In the middle of the court is a pool with water lilies, and jumping out of the pool is one of the Walker's best-loved sculptures, "Standing Glass Fish," by the renegade, rule-breaking architect Frank Gehry. Its scales are made of hundreds of diamond-shaped pieces of glass that gleam as the fish seems to leap out of the water, creating a shape whose perfection is worthy of Baryshnikov.

Up Betty Crocker Drive, over by a parking lot with sections named Cheerios and Bisquick, is some of the most daring contemporary sculpture you'll see anywhere. It's the General Mills Sculpture Collection, located on the 85-acre campus of the Minneapolis-based corporation, a few miles west of the city on Interstate 394. Those art-tour buses that stop at the Walker's sculpture garden are starting to stop here, too, as word about the company's fabulous outdoor sculpture gets out. General Mills has been acquiring sculpture since 1968; in 1982, the company decided that outdoor art would be the focus of its collecting.

Like the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, the one at General Mills is free and open to the public. Unlike the Walker garden, which was publicly funded, this one is the product of corporate largesse -- and the excellent taste and powers of persuasion of General Mills' curator, Donald McNeil. And while the Walker garden is a series of formal rectangles, the General Mills grounds encourage rambling hither and yon.

You should start, though, by walking into the entrance of the main building and asking for a free map of the sculptures. The map, which also has descriptions of the sculptures, is a helpful but simple affair, four Xerox-copied sheets of paper stapled together. Some corporate collections come with flashy color catalogs; maybe Midwestern modesty is why the General Mills collection, easily one of the top in the nation, does not.

Certainly the art in the collection -- 14 major works so far -- is anything but modest. Three of the artists with work here -- Jene Highstein, Jackie Ferrara and Siah Armajani -- also have work at the Walker garden. At General Mills, the art has been sited with particular care, and landscape architect William Rutherford obligingly created new hills and valleys for some pieces. Ferrara's "Stone Court," for instance, is recessed into a hillside. It has her signature horizontal layerings, but here in stone instead of her usual wood.

Armajani's 700-foot covered walkway serves the same purpose as the conservatory at the Walker. It provides wintertime shelter for the walk between the parking lot and corporate headquarters. And, with its bold, black-and-white, zigzag design and fan windows, it provides visual distraction en route. Philip Larson's "The Medusa" addresses a down-to-earth problem: the zillions of Canada geese on the grounds, whose droppings are all but impossible to see on the grass, leading many sculpture-hikers to step in the stuff. On Larson's sprawling series of brick pathways, though, you can see -- and avoid -- the goose-droppings.

Richard Fleischner's chapellike room, outlined in arborvitae, floored in patterned granite and open to the sky, provides a place for quiet retreat. Scott Burton's cast concrete "Public Table" is huge and round, encouraging sociability: General Mills employees have actually taken to reserving the outdoor table for meetings. Perhaps the most provocative piece on the grounds is Jonathan Borofsky's giant Cor-ten steel "Man with Briefcase." When female employees heard its title, they protested that General Mills was acquiring a male symbol. When the work arrived, though, it was the men who objected. Borofsky's "Man" is an empty silhouette, cut out of a giant sheet of steel. Not a flattering image of a corporate giant. But it's one that shows how open-minded and spirited General Mills is when it comes to contemporary art.