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Carol Bove's Light-Touch Heavy Metal Faces Down the Met *The American sculptor is the second artist invited to occupy the sculptural niches on Fifth Avenue.*

Jason Farago



Carol Bove at her studio last November in Red Hook, Brooklyn, in front of her unfinished sculptures for the front niches of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the back, left, is a plaster replica of part of the museum's facade. Credit...George Etheredge for The New York Times

“I didn’t want them to sit politely on the pedestals,” Carol Bove said to me this past summer. The sculptor was tiptoeing around a pile of crushed, tangled steel tubes, lying on the floor of her studio in the far south of Brooklyn. She’d reopened her workshop after a pandemic shutdown, and all around were the accouterments of art and industry. Forklifts and girders. Welders’ masks and hazmat suits. But there was also, rather incongruously, a shadow of a century past: a huge plaster replica of a Beaux-Arts sculpture pedestal, a full-scale copy of the empty ones on the facade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The crumpled tubes would form part of one of Bove’s largest-ever projects, for the museum’s second commission of new outdoor sculpture. Last week, after a six-month Covid-induced delay, the completed works were driven uptown and were being craned into place at 1000 Fifth Avenue.

There are four of them: abstract compositions of torqued and sandblasted steel, each around 11 feet tall, affixed with burnished discs of aluminum and placed on either side of the Met's sweeping staircase. They'll be here until November, and they indeed sit on their pedestals with a pleasant impertinence: thrust a bit too far forward, balanced a tick too precariously, looming a smidgen too large.



One of Bove's four sculptures for the facade of the Met, looking like a pair of unpressed trousers, on view through November. Credit...Carol Bove and David Zwirner, via The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Bruce Schwarz



Each sculpture has a pair of buffed aluminum discs, reflecting the museum, Fifth Avenue, and the buildings across the way. Credit...Carol Bove and David Zwirner, via The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Bruce Schwarz

Seen from Fifth Avenue, they appear like a quartet of performers — and if, like me last week, you were gunning down the street on an electric CitiBike, they almost appear to dance as you pass the museum's four blocks of frontage, like illustrations in a zoetrope. They have an unexpected lightness that belies the steel, and the crunch and crush of their making.

I was biking there to watch the installation process. The day before, two of the sculptures had been raised into position north of the museum's entrance. A third was lying prone near Fifth Avenue, suspended in a metal armature for safe transport, while the last of them was sitting near the esplanade's southern fountain. Two technicians on Bove's team removed a gleaming aluminum disc from a separate crate, and began to bolt it to the larger steel element.

Shortly after noon, with barely a sound, the sculpture started flying: The crane operator lifted it 30 feet in the air and guided the 3,000-pound snarl of steel toward his colleagues standing on the facade. The Met's staff raised their smartphones like at a rock concert or a papal mass. It all took less than two minutes.



Being hoisted into position on the Met's facade during the installation process. The works have an unexpected lightness that belies the steel, and the crunch and crush of their making. Credit... George Etheredge for The New York Times

The artist seemed pleased; beneath her two masks it was easy to detect a smile. “They’re kind of invisible at times, and very assertive in others,” Bove said. “They start a new pattern using the pattern of the surroundings, you know?”

Bove (pronounced bo-VAY), who turns 50 this year, rose to prominence at the start of the last decade for delicate, nuanced sculpture that came at the modernist tradition with a sideways glance. At the Museum of Modern Art, she showed silver-beaded curtains and mobiles of seashells and peacock feathers. On the then-undeveloped High Line, she placed large curlicues of white powder-coated steel in the wild grass. And when she turned to jumbo-size bent steel in 2014, she continued to accentuate the surprising lightness of metal through careful positioning and flat, frictionless finishes that made her sculptures look almost like digital renderings.

Her attention to a sculpture's surroundings, and her seesawing between physical and digital forms, made her a logical choice to face down the Met's long neoclassical facade. “So much of her early practice, and even now, has been about interrogating modes of display,” explained the Met curator Shanay Jhaveri, as we watched Bove's crew prepare to hoist sculpture No. 3. “How an artwork is framed and bracketed. We were excited to imagine what her response would be to an empty pedestal, an unoccupied niche.”



The four sculptures are made of sandblasted, ruffled metal tubes, painted a matte gray. They give the facade an enjoyable rhythm as you pass the museum. Credit...George Etheredge for The New York Times

Jhaveri and the artist spent the first months of 2020 trading images of sculptures from the Met's collection, as well as old abstract animations by filmmakers like Oskar Fischinger, a pioneer of hand-drawn motion graphics in the '20s and '30s, and Jordan Belson, who made spiritually inclined films of starbursts and mandalas. They were trying, Jhaveri said, to imagine how a sculpture could have "a sense of implied motion."

The museum's Beaux-Arts facade also led Bove to immerse herself in design and culture from the last Gilded Age. Art Deco jewelry, with its mixing of natural and mechanical motifs, offered one inspiration. So did "We're in the Money," the big Busby Berkeley number from "Gold Diggers of 1933," whose high-kicking chorines venerate the almighty dollar while wearing oversized coins on their arms.

What emerged was a play of opposites, or a theme and variations. The primary components of the four sculptures are the ruffled steel tubes, whose sandblasted, matte gray finish can remind you, in places, of a pair of unpressed trousers. They're welded together into metallic skeins, winding up and doubling back into a form that just barely hints at something statuesque.



In her Red Hook studio, Bove and her team shape the steel beams with the help of a hydraulic press. Credit...George Etheredge for The New York Times

As usual with Bove, these crushed steel forms are not preplanned on paper or in a model. Instead, they arise from a heavy-duty improvisation that's closer to drawing than classical hammer-and-chisel sculpting. She and her crew once bent the metal with elbow grease; now she has a custom hydraulic press, whose piston wallops the standard tubes into unexpected forms. "It's totally improvised, and it's reacting to what the material wants to do," she told me this past summer in her studio, as I examined the press. "It's not fully my will."

These works are abstract, though as Bove observed, "the first one I did is not that good at *not* being a figure. It looks like 'The Thinker.'" Yet these monumental sculptures come together in a markedly different method than those of Rodin and other sculptors circa 1900, who would start with a clay figure and then duplicate it at larger scale by use of a pantograph. Or than Wangechi Mutu, the first artist commissioned to occupy the Met's facade: her bronze caryatids, here from fall 2019 to summer 2020, began life as Plasticine models that were 3-D scanned and digitally enlarged.

Bove's start-big, pile-driving, additive method is closer to someone like Mark di Suvero, who welds full-scale steel beams into abstract totems. When I told Bove this summer that I'd recently been to Storm King, she singled out Di Suvero as a model for figuring out the form of a colossal sculpture as you work. "One of the things that's so pleasurable about his work is you feel this invention happening at *that* scale. You need a lot of force to do that. That's what's happening with these too — you need a lot of force, a lot of mechanisms, to make these heavy things actually light."



Sparks fly as a studio assistant welds two steel tubes to produce a joint. Credit...George Etheredge for The New York Times



The steel portions of these sculptures are made on the fly, without preparatory modeling. Credit...George Etheredge for The New York Times

Adjoined to the top and bottom of each metal body is a pair of perfect discs, polished to shine. If the sculptures' scrunched steel records weeks of physical labor, the discs, ordered from a foundry in Washington, appear as pristine and generic as a digital rendering. (Even during a pandemic, you can get anything shipped.) They're "perversely generic," Bove says. "It can be a cosmic unity, or it can just be sort of like a machine, a gear. And making them so symmetrical is suggestive of both."

The discs also echo the little-noticed medallion portraits of artists — Dürer, Velázquez, Raphael and the boys — in the spandrels of the Met facade’s three arches. On each of the four sculptures the discs face a different direction, and that gives the suite an enjoyable rhythm — that Busby Berkeley fanning action — as you go past the museum through the thinned traffic of Fifth Avenue.

They also offer unexpected reflections of the building, the street, and even the co-ops across the way. As the shape of the project became clearer, Bove commissioned digital models from engineers to plot the sun’s daily rise and fall — to understand how the shiny finish would look at different hours, but also, she said, “because there was concern they were going to blind the neighbors.” (Relief for the co-op boards: There’s nothing to worry about!)



The four sculptures, together titled “The séances aren’t helping,” installed on the facade of the Met. Credit...Carol Bove and David Zwirner, via The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Bruce Schwarz

Resolutely abstract, these sculptures have a bizarre title that hints at a narrative: “The séances aren’t helping,” rendered just like that, in sentence case, as if spoken. I ask her: not helping because the dead aren’t answering, or not helping because there’s no life after this one?

“It’s bringing in the idea of how we deal with the past,” she replied. “It’s either a materialist who’s disgusted, or a spiritualist who’s frustrated.” Like every universal museum, she suggests, the Met is a graveyard. The facade resuscitates old Europe for industrial America. Forgotten artists languish in storage for a century. Yes, literally — in the Egyptian wing, “there are things like the mummies!”

How, then, does a living artist speak authentically in this house of the dead? “In the tradition of Western architecture,” Bove answered, “it’s common for certain elements to be left for future architects. In a church, for example. Any grand architecture leaves parts for the next generation to fill.”