

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ARTS & CULTURE | FINE ART | ART REVIEW

## Speaking the Language of New York's Outdoor Sculpture

A trip through Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens turned up works that ranged from the extraordinary to the disastrously campy.

*By Brian P. Kelly*

*Oct. 17, 2025 5:42 pm ET*



LARRY BELL'S WORK IN MADISON SQUARE PARK.

## *New York*

Of all forms, art writers struggle most when approaching sculpture. William Tucker stresses the clash between the three-dimensional object and the written word with the title of his book “The Language of Sculpture.” Rosalind Krauss’s “Passages in Modern Sculpture” offers a chapter on “a new syntax for sculpture.” And Herbert George gives us “The Elements of Sculpture,” as if the variety of a boundless medium could be organized into a Strunk-and-White list of guidelines. The difficulties grow even more pronounced when discussing those highly visible sculptures that are usually committee-approved, intentionally uncontroversial and frequently appeal to the lowest common denominator: art in public. To ease the pain, and based on a tour of such works in New York this past week, I offer the following entries for whoever writes the next dictionary, almanac or other reference volume on sculpture.

**Accidental Sanitation-Department Fine:** The outcome of artists confusing material maximalism with mastery. In “The Socrates Annual 2025: Up/Rooted” (through April 6, 2026), the yearly show at Long Island City’s Socrates Sculpture Park, we see a prime example of this style in Zipporah Camille Thompson’s “Spellbound,” a work that throws various flotsam and jetsam together—aluminum tape, fishing line, reclaimed net, safety reflectors and more—with little regard to aesthetics. While other experiments with that approach have proven successful, this one results in a hanging work that looks like a trawler accidentally got its haulage caught in a tree.

**Anthropomorphic Ethnozoology:** A tradition that can trace its roots back to at least ancient Egypt, its more recent incarnations include Jeffrey Gibson’s quartet of sculptures for the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s facade, “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (through June 9, 2026). His animals—a deer, coyote, squirrel and hawk—live in nearby Central Park and the Hudson Valley, and are significant to indigenous cultures. These delightful characters, standing on hind legs, wear items associated with their species—a crown of acorns on the squirrel, for example—and offer a whimsical welcome to visitors that remind them of both the work’s setting and the complex relations between nature, development and local peoples.



TAI SHANI'S 'THE SUN IS A FLAME THAT HAUNTS THE NIGHT' ON THE HIGH LINE.

**Burning Man Leftovers:** These sculptures lack the gaudy grandeur of their relatives that are displayed annually at the festival in the Nevada desert but retain those works' air of muesli-munching elitism. At Socrates, examples include "A Sea In-MOTION," a star-shaped assemblage of bamboo fences by the Pioneers Go East Collective; and Natalia Nakazawa's part-buckyball, part-yurt "Dome Cartographies."

**Camp (bad):** The most common form of new art in public, these works loudly exaggerate without saying much. In the case of Tai Shani's "The Sun Is a Flame That Haunts The Night" on the High Line (though March 2026), the sculptures are illuminated but not illuminating: giant candles that light up in the evening. While undeniably fun, there's a vacuousness to them, ungrounded as they are in place or message—empty calories expelled as quickly as they're digested.



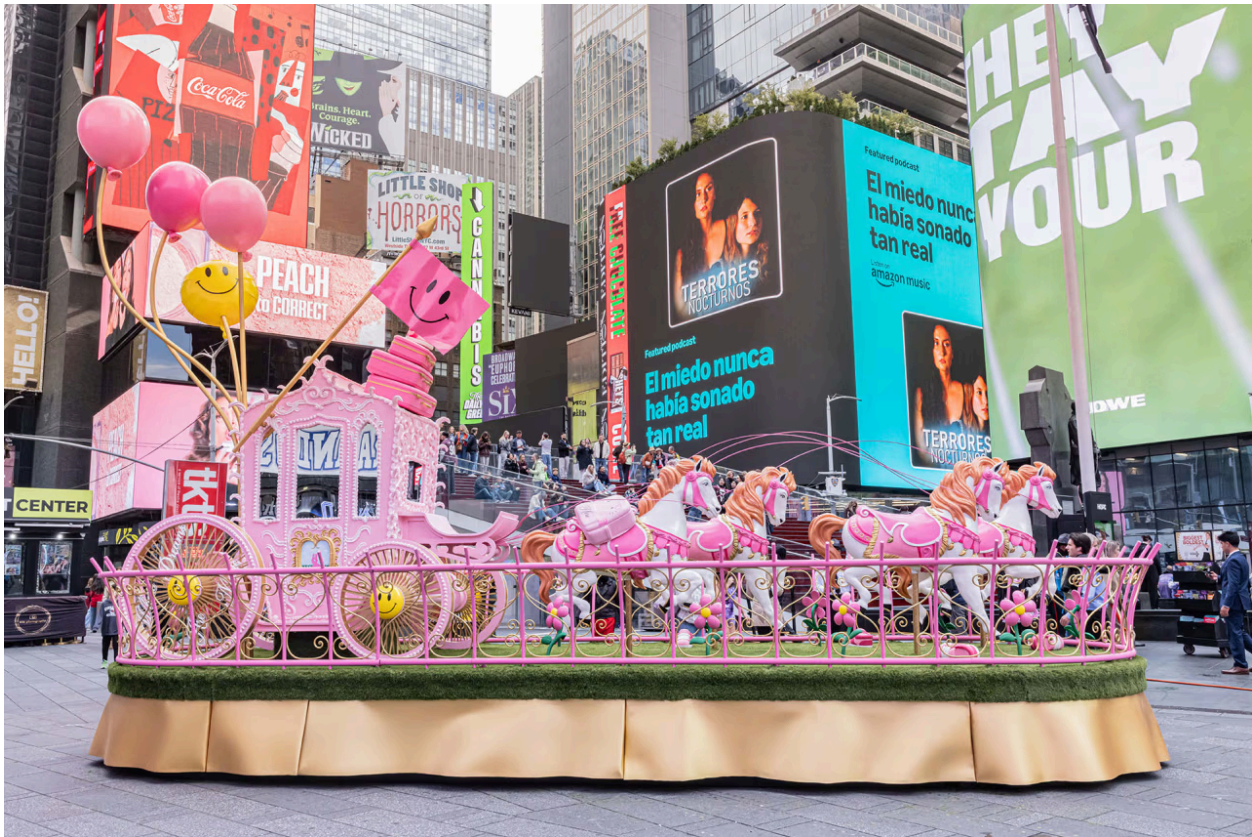


IVÁN ARGOTE'S 'DINOSAUR' ON THE HIGH LINE.

**Camp (good):** Amplification with elaboration. Iván Argote's "Dinosaur," also on the High Line (through spring 2026), is a towering 21-foot-tall hand-painted pigeon on a plinth. Laugh-out-loud funny, it gently wades into discourse about monuments—who gets to be celebrated, how, and for how long—while also reminding us of our mortality: The humble pigeon is the descendant of the long-dead dino, and human kind too will likely fade away one day.

**Camp (worst):** While bad camp is merely a sugary treat, the worst kind is a saccharine feast that would put even the most hale viewer into a diabetic coma. For instance, Yvette Mayorga's "Magic Grasshopper," just unveiled in Times Square (through Dec. 2), is a bubblegum pink carriage towed by a team of white ponies. Its wheels' gold rims, capped with smiley faces, are emblazoned with the platitude "Where Dreams Are Made," while the whole thing is ornamented with piped-icing filigree.





YVETTE MAYORGA'S 'MAGIC GRASSHOPPER' IN TIMES SQUARE.

**Conflict-Averse Formalism:** The second most common type of art in public, these works are most notable for being inoffensively pretty at a time when people can take offense at anything. Molly Gochman's "Monuments to Motherhood" at Brooklyn's Grand Army Plaza (through May 2026) is a snaking line of bronze that takes the form of a shelter, a ball and a jungle gym all at once. Perfectly pleasant but little more.

**Contemporary Relic:** Art that isn't particularly old, but feels like it comes from another time altogether. For instance, Deborah Kass's "OY/YO" in front of the Brooklyn Museum (ongoing) is still the cheery yellow that it was when it was installed nearly a decade ago, but the word sculpture's cheeky optimism—a nod to unity as well as the city's brash attitude and Jewish history—seems completely alien from the bleak perspective of 2025.



ONE OF THADDEUS MOSLEY'S WORKS IN CITY HALL PARK.

**Domestic Druidism:** By bringing the inside outside these sculptures cast a sort of spell by making the world feel comfier, more habitable. At Socrates (which was founded by Mark di Suvero, a master of monumental outdoor sculptures), Rowan Renee's "A loom for tender(ils)" is a series of frames lined with tautly pulled strings, which invite visitors to weave objects from around the park into their surfaces. One densely packed panel resembled a massive lab slide or a scientific diagram, and the variety of objects instantly makes you appreciate the natural diversity present in even a small patch of land.

**Don't Let the Masses Touch the Art for the Masses:** Exceptionally realized works that are good—so good, in fact, that apparently people can't be trusted to get close to them, like Larry Bell's works at Madison Square Park (through March 15, 2026). Mr. Bell once again proves that he's a master of light, transparency and reflection with colorful geometric constructions that shift in light and intensity as you walk around them. They're certain to take on different aspects as the seasons and colors of the park change, and I'm looking forward to revisiting, even though viewers aren't allowed on the grass near them.





MIKA ROTTENBERG'S 'FOOT FOUNTAIN (PINK)' ON THE HIGH LINE.

**Eco-Ambitionism:** Sculptures that speak to the power of nature but fall short in execution, such as Suchi Reddy's "Turbulence 2025" at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden (through Oct. 26). Mirrored panels at first appear translucent but upon closer inspection are opaque, causing a disorienting visual stitch thanks to the reflected nature that interrupts the other greenery that surrounds them; the result makes us think about the impact of human intervention on the environment. A conceptually interesting piece, its arrangement is too cramped. Here's hoping Ms. Reddy repeats the project on a larger scale so it can register its full impact.

**Grandmother's Garden Art:** Any work that would be just at home nestled into a patch of begonias as it would in a prominent public place. On the High Line (through Aug. 2026) Sopheap Pich's wire sculptures, reminiscent of flowers and dragonfly wings, come off as oversize versions of decor available at your local nursery.



TORKWASE DYSON'S 'AKUA' AT PIER 1 IN BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK.

**Modernist Beavercore:** If Brancusi had moved to Walden. At City Hall Park (through Nov. 16), Thaddeus Mosley's "Touching the Earth" features the artist's bold forms, which he usually carves out of wood, cast in bronze. The marks of chisels and other hand tools are prominent across all their surfaces, which appear sleek from a distance, making for an exciting juxtaposition between material and method.

**Neo-Sexpressionism:** Representational art that isn't overtly lewd but knows what it's doing. Mika Rottenberg's "Foot Fountain (pink)" is a phallic limb whose knobbly surface is particularly repulsive. The fact that it sprays water out of its bulbously erect end completes the ribaldry—a sculpture that's better suited for the pages of a teenage boy's notebook than the High Line (through May 2026).





AI WEIWEI'S 'CAMOUFLAGE' AT FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT FOUR FREEDOMS STATE PARK.

**Soft Slacktivism:** While people love to be confrontational online to make themselves feel like they're doing good, these works don't need the drama, content to pat themselves on the back for both their "advocacy" and their restraint. In Roosevelt Island's Four Freedoms State Park (through Nov. 10), Ai Weiwei has draped much of Louis Kahn's architecture in "Camouflage" as a plea for peace generally and in Ukraine more specifically. Lofty ambitions, but the work leaves you with the impression of an empty gesture.

**Sonic Industrialism:** Sound elements are more popular than ever, and this mode blends intangible noise with the hard-edge materials of industry. At Pier 1 in Brooklyn Bridge Park (through March 8, 2026) Torkwase Dyson does just that with "Akua." Steel ribs encase the viewer, giving one the feeling of being in an upturned ship, as a soundtrack that ranges from gospel singing to mechanical clicks plays in the background. It's a transportive experience that washes away the noise of Dumbo tourists and chugging ferries.

**Space-Age Archaeology:** Blending materials has long been a sculptural practice, but this movement intentionally mixes styles and media from opposite ends of the technological spectrum. Catherine Telford Keogh's "Cradlers" at Socrates raises steel and aluminum high into the air on poles, intersecting constructions that look like fragments from a spaceship's hull with fossiliferous limestone blocks. We feel keenly aware of our place in the present, the vast history that preceded us, and the long future that lies ahead.

**Mr. Kelly is the Journal's associate Arts in Review editor. Follow him on X @bpkelly89 and write to him at [brian.kelly@wsj.com](mailto:brian.kelly@wsj.com).**

**find this article:** <https://www.wsj.com/arts-culture/fine-art/speaking-the-language-of-new-yorks-outdoor-sculpture-airdigital-9bc8f852>

**archive.org :** <https://archive.ph/bAryG>