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News

A new shtick for Philly: A big, yellow welcoming OY — or YO — sculpture at 5th and Market

The OY/YO sculpture will be 8 feet high and 16-feet-wide in “Lamborghini yellow.” The YO side will face Independence Mall.



Rendering of the OY YO art installation coming soon to 5th and Market Streets, Philadelphia. The art is the creation of Deborah Kass and is being installed on loan for at least a year by the Weitzman National Museum of Jewish History. Deborah Kass / Barry Halkin

by Frank Kummer Updated Apr 19, 2022

Yo, Philly!
Oy, Philly?
Soon, it might all depend on your perspective.
Literally.

The Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History plans to install an 8-foot-tall, 16-foot-wide, “Lamborghini yellow,” “OY/YO” sculpture with the YO facing out toward Fifth and Market Streets in a welcoming Philly-style shout-out.

The OY will face the museum as if in a lighthearted wink toward the Yiddish word signaling exasperation, jubilation, grittiness, or struggle — depending on who is saying it, and how.

The Philadelphia Art Commission last week unanimously approved a temporary installation of the sculpture by the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based artist Deborah Kass, which museum officials hope will become permanent.

Philadelphia could soon have a sculpture with double-meaning, depending on where someone stands: A YO facing out toward Independence Mall and an OY facing toward the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History. [Read more Weitzman National Museum of Jewish History / Deborah Kass](#)

The sculpture is under construction. It will be at a key tourism bus stop, across from SEPTA's Independence Mall subway location.

It could serve as a sort of connective tissue through art, said Josh Perelman, chief curator at the museum.

“As we introduce this work of art to the city, one of the important things that we want to communicate is this is, in many ways, an ongoing love letter to the city,” Perelman said. “This kind of beautiful connection from the Rocky statue, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, to the LOVE sculpture on the Parkway, you’ll have this diagonal chain connected to those other iconic sculptures that already exist.”

The Yo, Perelman notes, is connected with Philly through Rocky’s “Yo, Adrian” scene, as well as the city’s Hispanic community, with Yo translating as “I” — not to mention its use in hip-hop and slang.

Originally, museum officials planned to face the OY toward the street but decided YO is more welcoming.

“As of right now, the sculpture will be on loan to the museum,” Perelman said, noting a one-year agreement. “Our hope is that the sculpture will be thoroughly embraced by the Philadelphia community and that we will be able to transition from a loan to permanent.”

Perelman expects that OY/YO will be installed “in the very near future” and that the museum will pay for transportation and installation.

City officials expect the sculpture to become a social media favorite.

Plans call for the letters, about 5 feet deep, to be made from rolled aluminum, mounted on steel supports, and welded to a steel plate.

The sculpture has another connection to the Art Museum: Its creator. Kass, 70, notes that she bought her first art book at the museum while she was 17 and visiting a friend in the city.

Kass’ OY/YO sculpture is not new. It is her most iconic work, and a version was installed at

the Brooklyn Bridge Park in 2015, then moved to its current location at the Brooklyn Museum. Another version is installed at Stanford University's Cantor Arts Center. The sculpture for Philly will be the third.

Kass said the inspiration came from Ed Ruscha's painting OOF — large yellow letters on a blue field.

"It's a pretty famous painting, and I regularly visit the Museum of Modern Art [in New York], so I've seen it a million times," Kass said Monday. "But one time I was looking at it, the word Oy just popped into my head. So I made the painting, same size, same colors, but instead of OOF, it said OY."

She later caught the reflection of her OY painting reflected in a gallery window and noticed it spelled YO backward. From that, she formed a 10-by-20-inch sculpture that could be viewed as OY or YO depending on the position of the viewer.

"It's kind of a lesson in how art makes itself right," Kass said with a laugh. "And then I had an opportunity to do a monumental sculpture on the waterfront in Brooklyn. It was a complete no-brainer to make it really big."

Kass said she came to Philly to meet with Weitzman officials a few years ago about an overall exhibit of her work, and the OY/YO sculpture came up almost immediately, but it took a few years to finalize.

"It's fantastic," Kass said, of having her third OY/YO sculpture at such a prominent spot. "I think location, location, location."

Rocky will no doubt come to mind when people see the sculpture, Kass said, but the slang fits in with the city's diverse population of white working-class, Black, and Hispanic residents.

"And, you know, the expression of dismay or acknowledgment of trouble — something that Jews are always thinking about," Kass said. "The fact that it speaks to so many communities is what the piece is about."

The city's Art Commission welcomed the sculpture during a regular meeting last week. The only reservation commissioners has is whether there will be enough room for people to safely gather in front, or behind, for pictures.

Perelman, the museum's exhibition director, said the design takes that into account and will leave enough room for people to easily pass. The museum has also worked with SEPTA to ensure the installation does not interfere with the Market-Frankford Line below, he said.

"I think it's a great addition to the city," said José Almiñana, a member of the Art Commission.

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