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Sonoma Plaza welcome new outdoor art exhibit



SLIDE 2 OF 3

A photographer finds a creative way to take a picture of Peter Hassen's large metal sculpture, part of his 'Cycles' series, after the installation on Tuesday, May 4, 2021. (Photo by Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune)

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At dawn on May 4, as daylight crept in from the east, heavy equipment rumbled to life in downtown Sonoma. Flatbeds and bucket loaders idled in the thin morning light and a huddle of people gathered under the palm tree in front of city hall. The trucks and the people were there for the same reason: to install Sonoma Valley Museum of Art's 2021 outdoor public art on the Sonoma Plaza.

The installation features eight sculptures in various mediums, all of it scaled to suit an outdoor setting. Titled "A Delicate Balance," the museum's 2021 outdoor exhibit will be on display through Oct. 19.

'I guarantee there will be people who don't like this. Having controversy, having pushback, is the nature of public art.'

— Linda Keaton, SVMA executive director

Near the duck pond on Tuesday at 5:30 a.m., three steel orbs sat lashed to a large truck as a forklift shuddered and beeped its way into position. Using just one yellow tie-down looped through the orb's lattice, the lift hoisted the sculpture while its creator, Peter Hassen, looked on attentively. Hassen, who lives and works in Sonoma, contributed three pieces to "A Delicate Balance," all of them of a similarly distinctive milieu. Asked to decode the meaning of the intricate pieces, Hassen said, "My 'Cycles' series applies directly to (SVMA's) theme as all three works speak to the interconnection among nature, science, and spirituality."

The largest of the three globes, standing nearly 8 feet tall, was moved last, and Hassen climbed onto the piece to confirm it had made the journey unharmed. "That's gonna be a jungle gym," an onlooker said, watching Hassen belay himself across the orb's surface.

Indeed, each previous time the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art has staged outdoor art in Sonoma, the public embrace of it has been interactive. Despite posted signs reminding viewers to look but not touch, the pieces in the museum's earlier outdoor exhibits proved too tempting for some. That fact was considered by the city council in April when they discussed "A Delicate Balance" during a public meeting. People climbing on the art was a calculated risk, they determined, mitigated by the social and aesthetic value of major artworks on public view. "They're beautiful!" Sonoma City Councilmember Madolyn Agrimonti exclaimed.

What did give the council pause was the proposed placement of two sculptures, titanic twin heads by Jun Kaneko, a Japanese ceramicist with deep California connections. Museum officials wanted to install Kaneko's pieces on the lawn outside city hall, equidistant on the right and left sides of the Plaza's iconic palm tree. But the city had only allowed the museum to place artwork there one time before, protective of the unadorned view of city hall from that spot.

"I love our public art program," Councilmember Kelso Barnett said. "But is there any chance that the placement (on the lawn) might result in future pushback?"

Museum executive director Linda Keaton took the possibility of pushback in stride. "I guarantee there will be people who don't like this," Keaton said. "Having controversy, having pushback, is the nature of public art."

The concept behind "A Delicate Balance" is an acknowledgment of the push-pull within any singular idea. "There's a balance between abstraction and representation, between nature and technology, between what's fragile and what's solid, between humans and science," Keaton said. In a pandemic year that forced reflection for many, the concept of true balance is especially relevant, she said.

Bruce Beasley's two iterations of "Refuge of the Moon" are a literal take on the abstraction of balance. Made of carved granite that is both hard-edged and elliptic, the pieces are stacked assemblages of rectangles and rounds. Placed atop steel plates on the Plaza's southeast quadrant, Beasley's sculptures are fashioned from behemoth blocks of stone; a hard, heavy medium rendered into smooth softness.

In counterbalance to the weight and heft of the other sculptures, Catherine Daley's "Aurora" is an ethereal coda. Intended to conjure the beauty of the Aurora Borealis, its clear rods sway and shift in the breeze, creating a kind of soft, watery music. The plexiglass rods reflect off the aluminum platform beneath them, evoking both water and light. Placed just beyond the Plaza's rose garden, "Aurora" might — with imagination — be mistaken for rain.

"A Delicate Balance" is the fourth public art installment staged in recent years by the museum. The first — a collection of large industrial sculptures from renowned metalist Albert Paley — was installed through the summer of 2017. In 2018, "Natural Affinity" was mounted, featuring bronze woodland animals and other creatures. That same year, word art by artist Laura Kimpton was installed in front of city hall as a way of acknowledging the community's literal trial by fire. That piece, four filigreed letters spelling L-O-V-E, proved to be a selfie-magnet for tourists and locals alike.

"A Delicate Balance" will be on view through Oct. 19. A formal opening reception featuring some of the artists is scheduled for some time in June, pending Centers for Disease Control guidelines. "Providing public art fulfills SVMA's mission of building community around art," Keaton said. "(We're) pleased to partner with the City of Sonoma to bring the art of such diverse and stellar artists."

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