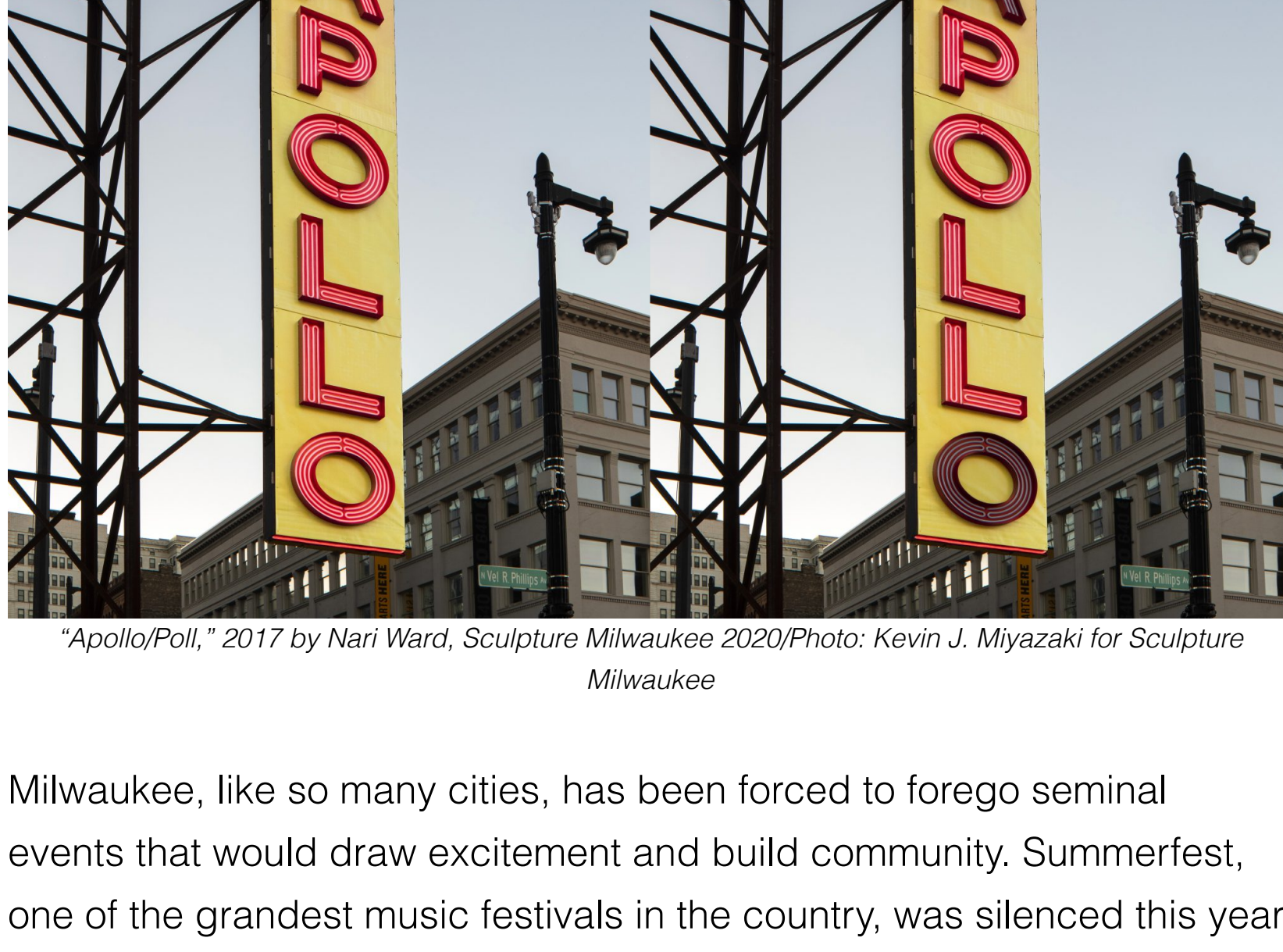


Civics Lesson: A Review of Sculpture Milwaukee

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"Apollo/Poll," 2017 by Nari Ward, Sculpture Milwaukee 2020/Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki for Sculpture Milwaukee

Milwaukee, like so many cities, has been forced to forego seminal events that would draw excitement and build community. Summerfest, one of the grandest music festivals in the country, was silenced this year. The Democratic National Convention, which was to be held in the Milwaukee Convention Center, took place mainly by remote means.

And yet, in the midst of these closures, a public art exhibition flourishes. Sculpture Milwaukee has returned for a fourth year, transforming downtown Milwaukee's landscape with A-list artists exhibiting outdoor sculpture. Its goal is to "serve as a catalyst for community engagement, economic development and creative placemaking."

There is much to see. It is exciting and safe to view these artworks outdoors and on the street. An audio tour is available, as well as a playlist provided by DJs from Radio Milwaukee. A clear thread of activism and cultural commentary runs through the exhibition, inviting timely discourse.



"Within the Folds (Dialogue 1)," 2020, by Thomas J. Price, Sculpture Milwaukee 2020/Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki for Sculpture Milwaukee

Thomas J. Price celebrates and simultaneously critiques monumental public sculpture. His larger-than-life bronze portrait "Within the Folds (Dialogue I)," shows a figure in a familiar, heroic stance, his gaze looking toward a distant horizon. We are reminded of statues of soldiers and military leaders. This male figure is dressed in street clothes, and Price's subject is a member of the Black Caribbean diaspora of London. Price has elevated this figure to expose disparity and long-held biases in culture and art. As I contemplated the statue, NilexNile sang, "This ain't Babylon" on the playlist. As much as the figure describes a proud monumentality, the same heroic pose is also a chilling evocation of a memorial.

I was also struck by a weighty and mytho-magical bronze head of Jim Dine. The seven-foot self-portrait of the eighty-five-year-old artist is craggy and pitted. A deep green patina makes it feel antique and derelict. Branches are leaned against and ring around the head, creating a mask, or perhaps a prison. It is an existential investigation. It seems that Dine is asking us to see behind this curtain into the artist's very core, or to ask ourselves to look into ours. I found it mysterious, almost frightening, and very beautiful.



"JOKESTER," 2018, by Paula Crown, Sculpture Milwaukee 2020/Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki for Sculpture Milwaukee

In the Third Ward, Chicago artist Paula Crown has contributed a massive, and contagiously selfie-inducing version of a crushed red Solo cup, the one-handed accessory of college parties. Although this iconic Pop object attracts revelers in droves to mug in front of it, Crown is actually beseeching viewers to acknowledge the massive waste and danger of our single-use culture. This large, discarded cup is telling us the party is over. I'm not sure that visitors got that message. In a similar way, cars pulled over and viewers jumped out to take photos in front of Nari Ward's large re-creation of the famous sign for the Apollo Theatre, "Apollo/Poll." The sign is elegant, and the juxtaposition of seeing it in Milwaukee instead of Harlem is eye-catching. However, I couldn't help but notice that the pleasure and appeal of this image may overwhelm its deeper message that exposes how people of color are involved in, or denied participation in, the democratic process. Maybe seeing these artworks on the street inhibits a more thoughtful reflection of their messages, or they are simply so visually engaging that people don't see beyond their Pop prettiness.



"Shoreline Repast," by Paul Druecke, a legacy work, Sculpture Milwaukee 2020/Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki for Sculpture Milwaukee

Milwaukee artists are always highlighted in this exhibition series. Maggie Sasso has sewn a textile sculpture of an Art Deco lighthouse that stands off of the shores of Milwaukee in Lake Michigan. Sasso has softly sculpted this navigational beacon. Through this transformation, the structure feels nostalgic, like a child's toy or a playground. It conveys a sense of longing for the stalwart resolve early Milwaukeeans needed to make the city safe and successful. The symbolism of the lighthouse bringing people and goods safely into harbor is a welcome and hopeful addition.

The exhibition is supplemented by educational programming, community engagement and legacy purchases of artwork from previous years. Sculpture Milwaukee remains a significant civic achievement. (Rafael Francisco Salas)

"Sculpture Milwaukee" is on view in downtown Milwaukee. Most works on display through May 2021. More information can be found at

[Sculpture Milwaukee](https://art.newcity.com/2020/11/09/civics-lesson-a-review-of-sculpture-milwaukee/).

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