

A Mirror to Nature

New Sculpture by Marko Remec at the Nassau Museum

As silent as a mirror is believed

Realities plunge in silence by...

--Hart Crane, "Legend"

"It's a reflective process," Marko Remec deadpans, as he marks a thirty-foot telephone pole for the placement of mirrors for his beacon-like "Would That I Wish For (Tall Totem)," about to rise before the stately Museum façade. The joke is quintessential Remec—simultaneously funny and on target. He has spent an hour pacing the pole, turning it, stretching five string guidelines along which the mirrors will be arrayed, and sizing up (without a hint of the fussiness of so many perfectionists) the slight curvature and irregularities at one end of the pole. "It's just the soul of the tree—I'll work with it." The tape measure zips out and snaps back in as he measures and marks with a Sharpie. When the installation begins, Remec allows hand and eye free reign for adjustments, so that the spacing and angling of the mirrors have more of a human touch than something that might be generated by an algorithm (or a Minimalist homage to Euclid). These deviations are essential to the effect of the work.

Remec chose the site and steadily monitors the play of light through the trees and over the roofline. This is the first of three major works he is installing over the course of two weeks, and each is exquisitely attuned to the 145-acre grounds of the Museum, including the blooming trees of the arboretum, the other sculptures, the movement of visitors and, always, the track of the sun. Whatever Shakespeare may have implied about the balance between art and life when he called his play a "mirror to nature," surely one aspect was the question of *mimesis*, the faithful reflection of nature in art. Remec is taking that to extremes, and it is paradoxically adding to the beauty of nature, in a place that packs an aesthetic punch, with materials that are utterly industrial.

The three sculptures are scintillating examples of the ambitious approach that Remec takes to site-specific work. With its soaring vertical gesture, "Would That I Wish For (Tall Totem)" explores issues of safety and narcissism (according to the artist), while also drawing on the tradition of incorporating the faces of ancestors in a monumental totem (except that the faces are those of the viewer as reflected in the mirrors). Perched in his bucket lift near the top of the pole when a wide-eyed class of third-graders poured from the museum doors, he challenged them with a question: "What color is it?" Of course, the work takes on the cerulean of a spring sky, the emerald of opening leaves or the ruby of newly applied lipstick depending upon whatever happens to be in front of it. It is fantastic proof of color's status as a secondary quality in the Aristotelian cosmos, which always prioritizes form. The kids are fascinated, and behind them the museum visitors, just dazzled inside by an Art Deco diamond and emerald necklace in the Jazz Age show, are similarly struck by the "optical density," as one critic has characterized these works. It is the sculptor as virtuoso, transfiguring the commonplace (the poles were originally chosen for a Peekskill commission because they are ubiquitous along the Hudson) into an artwork that blows the viewer away. I am tempted to compare these fanfares to a bravura etude by Franz Liszt, but the more

apt soundtrack with be the recursive inventions of Johann Sebastian Bach (the Glenn Gould recording of the Goldberg Variations, of course) or the architecturally soaring pedal point of Vivaldi. For the record, Remec drives around listening to the Rolling Stones.

Not far from the Tall Totem, a sprawling horizontal frieze created from 16 huge convex dome mirrors, "NYET," assumes the pattern of a stylized eye. The title is a sly allusion to the government surveillance and persecution of Dimitri Shostakovich and other artists, whose work was performed at the Baker Mansion in Manhattan when the first iteration of this powerful work was presented. At the Museum, it occupies a quiet corner of the great lawn, surveying at a dozen or so of the Museum's collection arrayed before it. Although we are not far from Elmcroft, the notorious Soviet-era nest of spies in Upper Brookville, the Cold War allusion seems remote in this genteel setting. As Remec asks, "Who is saying nyet to whom?"

The *piece de resistance* in this exhibition is the first work encountered by the visitor, a riverine band of more than a hundred 33-inch convex dome mirrors that alluringly rise and fall with the sinuous contours of the land along the stately drive that leads to the Museum mansion. Its title, "Vertebrate Progression (Field Totem)," is an allusion to paleontology, the passion of Childs Frick, who lived in the mansion and kept his laboratory and library of specimens in a nearby outbuilding, now the Manes Family Art and Education Center. Like the glittering ribbon of light of a Swiftian diamond tennis bracelet, the flow of mirrors along the grass has a mesmerizing rhythmic effect. It was meticulously planned months before using three-dimensional topographical images made by a drone as well as, always and always, the steadily searching eye of the artist during site visits. The prep is his favorite bit: "What I love about art is thinking of things like the field totem beforehand. Installing is fun, but the best part is the plan. I spend a lot of time agonizing over the details so that when I work on site it goes quickly." True to form, the artist and one assistant (the indefatigable Rey Castillo, who also assisted Kenny Scharf on the nearby Manes mural), with clockwork precision and a rhythm of their own, cover the hillside in less than one day.

By now you are wondering who this chap is. Marko Remec is a New York-born conceptual sculptor living in Manhattan (with a fantastic studio by PS1 in Long Island City) whose work has been showcased at such prestigious museums and collections as MASS MoCA, LongHouse Reserve, Chesterwood, Kunsthaus Zug, Museo de Arte de Ponce, Salem Art Works and the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art. In Zug and Rome, he collaborated with Ilya and Emilia Kabakov on the Ship of Tolerance Project. Instantly popular with museum visitors who are active on social media, he has also attracted the notice of notable collectors and critics with his wry wit and brilliant compositional strategies. Remec is a rising star in the Contemporary sculpture world. He graduated from Williams College and Stanford University with degrees in art, science and business.

Remec arrived at Williams, cradle of so many prominent art-world figures of his generation that they are nicknamed "the Williams mafia," as a hard-working organic chemistry major, pre-med. On a lark, he signed up for a studio art class in the fall of his freshman year. The professor roared up on a Harley, clad in black leather from head to toe. It was Thomas Krens, later the radical director of the Guggenheim Museum. The artist in residence was the similarly charismatic, and mercurial, Jim Dine. Remec was hooked. He made art his second major, taking a work-study job in the sculpture studio and also working in a conservation lab. Traveling with his father, a professor of political science, he was as deeply moved by the architecture of India and Egypt as by anything in the Louvre, and although he had a superb art history faculty at Williams, he was never waltzed away by the heroics of Picasso or Warhol. Eventually

he completed his MBA at Stanford University and found himself in mergers and acquisitions at Goldman Sachs during the go-go Eighties. As vital as his art education proves, the equally important take-away from Remec's education and professional background may just be the analytic powers of a mind that can anatomize molecular structures or Wall Street takeovers. "So much of what I do is problem-solving," he confides during a closely monitored break from installation. The bright logic of his work has just added its timeless brilliance to the stately grounds of the Frick mansion, cast back upon its windows thousands of times in images of impermanence.

Charles A. Riley II, PhD

Director, Nassau Museum

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