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Geffen Hall Commissions New Art That Honors Black and Latino History

The new hall sparkles with new art by Nina Chanel Abney and Jacolby Satterwhite.

By Will Heinrich | Oct. 8, 2022



“San Juan Heal” (2022) by Nina Chanel Abney, on the northern facade of Geffen Hall, pays tribute to San Juan Hill, a diverse neighborhood in the '40s and '50s that was home to Black and Puerto Rican populations later displaced to make way for redevelopment, including Lincoln Center. | Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

Public art commissions are tricky. The creator has to make something that’s accessible but enduring, relevant to the site but also able to stand on its own. Still, [Jacolby Satterwhite](#) and [Nina Chanel Abney](#), tapped by Lincoln Center, the Public Art Fund and the Studio Museum in Harlem to celebrate the reopening of David Geffen Hall with a pair of major new installations, make it look easy.

Satterwhite, 36, a Brooklyn-based artist, works in performance, 3-D animation and sculpture, often incorporating drawings by his mother, Patricia Satterwhite, into elaborate installations. Abney, 40, best known for painting, also lives in New York and is a public art veteran. They were chosen from a short list of nominated artists after submitting proposals. Between them, the artists incorporate the history of the Lincoln Center and its performing companies, and also of San Juan Hill, the largely Black and Puerto Rican neighborhood displaced by the performing arts complex, into deeply thoughtful pieces that are also joyful and welcoming.

Both will stay up 18 months before giving way to new commissions. (Sadly missing is Richard Lippold’s majestic, 40-foot “Orpheus and Apollo,” removed from the hall in 2014 and [currently slated to reappear at La Guardia Airport](#).)

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Photo of “An Eclectic Dance to the Music of Time,” a video by Jacobly Satterwhite at David Geffen Hall in Manhattan. | Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

“San Juan Heal,” Abney’s contribution, comprises 35 large vinyl squares ornamenting most of the building’s northern facade. Collagelike shapes render an apropos figure, letter or phrase: “Soul at the Center,” “San Juan Hill,” Thelonious Monk in a red cap. (He lived in the area.) The mixture captures the sometimes dissonant vibrancy of this particular patch of Manhattan; several large letter Xs could stand for multiplying different influences or for the overlooked histories that have been crossed out. But the bold colors and easy legibility, and the way the whole thing makes the building look almost like an educational children’s toy, reach out and grab you across Broadway.

Satterwhite’s “An Eclectic Dance to the Music of Time,” a half-hour video that will play on all 400 square feet of the lobby’s digital wall whenever it’s not simulcasting concerts, offers a kind of simulated timeless Lincoln Center. News tickers share factoids about the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic, especially relating to Black musicians and composers (like the opera singer Marian Anderson or the child prodigy Philippa Schuyler).

Dancers and musicians, choreographed by Satterwhite, silently follow their muses under billboard-size photos of performers from the past in a constantly moving digital landscape. As the views swing gently in and out and the video’s muted colors cycle through four sections, the piece achieves an extraordinary balance between stasis and movement, picture and narrative, the excitement of the present and the grandeur of history.