MILDRED HOWARD
IN THE LINE OF FIRE

NED SMYTH
MOMENTS OF MATTER AND LIFE

SHIRLEY FITERMAN ART CENTER
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE, CUNY
INTERVENTIONS

JUNE 3 – SEPTEMBER 25, 2021

MILDRED HOWARD
IN THE LINE OF FIRE

NED SMYTH
MOMENTS OF MATTER AND LIFE
INTERVENTIONS is a project organized in partnership with Battery Park City Authority that focuses on parallel exhibitions of the work of Mildred Howard and Ned Smyth. Both are noted artists who have created distinguished bodies of work and have extensive histories of creating public art works, and each currently have works on view in the public parks and open spaces of Battery Park City.

The role of public art in New York City has evolved dramatically from early state-sanctioned monuments. The 1960s and 70s saw a fundamental rethinking of the role of public art as New York began to adopt its use as a way to reshape urban spaces. John Lindsay (who became mayor of New York City in 1966) and members of his administration played a critical role as proponents of public art, embracing the free and democratic exhibition of artworks throughout the city’s parks and civic spaces. They felt that sculpture played a crucial role in revitalizing streets and plazas and promoting public spaces as inviting and safe. Doris Freedman, who was key to these efforts, directed the Office of Cultural Affairs and later founded the Public Art Fund.

At the same time, many artists of the period embraced industrial materials and approaches and began to occupy huge vacant warehouse spaces in downtown Manhattan in which they lived and worked. As artists experimented with innovative forms and mediums, as well as new ways of presenting them, they began to infiltrate and engage with city spaces, many of which were abandoned or in disrepair, largely due to the shift away from industrial manufacturing.

By the mid-1970s, the city was facing a severe fiscal crisis, and non-profit and private arts organizations, as well as public-private collaborations, emerged to support the arts. The Public Art Fund, founded in 1977, championed public art and has presented hundreds of artists’ exhibitions and projects at sites throughout New York City. Another vital organization was founded by Alanna Heiss in 1971 as the Institute for Art and Urban Resources Inc., which organized exhibitions in abandoned spaces across the city (and later developed into what is now known as MoMA PS1). Creative Time, established in 1974, was also critical. Established by Karin Bacon, Susan Henshaw Jones, and Anita Contini, Creative Time became a leading city organization facilitating experimental public art. It has worked with artists to organize hundreds of groundbreaking works, including its landmark Art on the Beach exhibitions of the late-70s and early-80s, that took place on the landfill “beach” that was the newly formed, unbuilt urban landscape of Battery Park City.

Battery Park City began in the late 60s as a reclamation project to replace dilapidated piers along the Hudson River in downtown Manhattan with landfill, and developed into
a grand vision to construct a 92-acre mixed residential, parkland, and commercial site. In 1968, the State created the Battery Park City Authority to oversee the development of the former port area. By using massive amounts of soil and rock excavated during the construction of the World Trade Center and various other projects, and cantilevering it over 1.2 miles of the Hudson River shoreline, Manhattan was extended a few blocks further into the Hudson River and the land on which Battery Park City sits was created. However, largely due to the city’s financial crisis, very little building started in the 70s, beyond the creation of the site. Public art projects were integral to its master plans and came to incorporate collaborations with architects, landscape architects, and artists such as Mary Miss (South Cove) and Ann Hamilton (Teardrop Park), and include works by Louise Bourgeois, Tom Otterness, and Martin Puryear, in addition to many other notable artists.

Much has gone into the organization of this project, particularly given the complicating factor of the current pandemic. First and foremost, we would like to thank the artists, Mildred Howard and Ned Smyth, without whose commitment and generosity we would not have been able to mount these exhibitions. We also wish to thank our partners at the Battery Park City Authority for their dedication in bringing this project to fruition, particularly Abby Ehrlich, BPCA Director of Community Partnerships and Public Art, and Iphigenia Seong, BPCA Community Partnerships & Public Art Associate, who have been critical to the development of Interventions; and Eric Munson, Chief Operating Officer, and BJ Jones, President and Chief Executive Officer, to whom we are deeply appreciative for their enthusiasm and support.

At BMCC, Curatorial Assistant Elsy Benitez furnished exceptional assistance on all aspects of these exhibitions, facilitating at every step of the way; and the Public Affairs team led by Executive Director Manuel Romero, and particularly Multimedia and Video Specialist David Pangburn, provided unparalleled help on this project and the accompanying content. We extend our sincerest appreciation to President Anthony Monroe, Vice President for Institutional Advancement Lorna Malcolm, Special Legal Counsel Meryl Kaynard, and Assistant Vice President for Finance Eileen Samuel for their help and encouragement. Many thanks also to Jorge Yafar, Assistant Vice President of Campus Planning and Facilities, and Cheryl Reiter, Administrative Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds. Last but not least, we would like to recognize our student docents: Evelyn Chavez, Elanna Conn, Tiffany Danielian, Isabel Lainez, Adaley Munoz, and William Ortiz.

—Lisa Panzera, Director
Shirley Fiterman Art Center, BMCC
MILDRED HOWARD AND ART AS INTERVENTION
Abigail M. Ehrlich, Director of Community Partnerships and Public Art, BPCA and Iphigenia Seong, Community Partnerships and Public Art Associate, BPCA

Many of the outdoor artworks in Battery Park City were created as interventions in public spaces meant to invite viewers to rethink their ideas about the world. Presenting art in the context of our everyday settings (as opposed to museums or private places), allows us opportunities to openly and directly engage with the work. In 1982 when Agnes Denes planted two acres and harvested 1,000 golden pounds of wheat in the new, barren landfill of an as yet undeveloped Battery Park City, she armed with an activist’s site-specific intentionality and an environmentalist’s passion. For Denes, planting, sustaining, and harvesting wheat in “that location facing the Financial District, pushed against the system and created a powerful paradox.” Denes called her project: “…impossible, insane, and wasting valuable real estate. It grew out of the long-standing concern and need to call attention to our misplaced priorities. Wheatfield – A Confrontation (1982) was a symbol. To question the status quo and call attention to mismanagement, waste, ecological concerns, and food insecurity, prompting people to rethink their priorities.” Nearly forty years after Wheatfield, Mildred Howard’s The House That Will Not Pass For Any Color Than Its Own (2011), stands as a temporary addition to Battery Park City Authority’s large public art collection. The House That Will Not Pass For Any Color Than Its Own quietly welcomes people inside its deep purple walls. Once inside, viewers encounter curious illogical surprises of color and form, prompting a reconsideration of the work and our world. Like Wheatfield, Howard’s work presents paradoxes that quietly reveal themselves.

Plans to borrow The House That Will Not Pass For Any Color Than Its Own from Sacramento Department of Airports began in 2018 and the installation opened in 2020 with unanticipated sorrow in the wake of the horrific murder of George Floyd, the profound and lasting public outcry for racial justice that followed, and in the midst of a deadly global pandemic. Similarly, plans to exhibit In the Line of Fire, one of many powerful examples of Howard’s work from the 1990’s, began in 2019. The artwork portrays, with eerie relevance, cut-outs of a young African American citizen with a target on his back—a lamentation and reprise of the violence facing American people of color today. As the artist reminds us, “These were and are all of our children. It should not matter what color their skin is.”

Howard draws on the relationships between history, myth, and collective memory in works that evoke both the personal and the universal. In the Line of Fire mines these connections. The piece consists of roughly 60 life-sized figures cut from plywood, each silkscreened with the identical image of a young man in his late teens—a distant relative of Howard’s—who had been drafted or enlisted into the U.S. Army during the First World War. The grouping of young Black soldiers forms a regiment, recalling a history of segregated units in the United States military through the Second World War. Hundreds of thousands of young Black men that enlisted with hopes of demonstrating service and belonging in American society were met with racial discrimination and hostility both abroad and at home. African American frontline troops were given less training and assigned to more dangerous missions—notably, the 369th Infantry Regiment spent the most time in the trenches and suffered the most casualties of any American unit in the First World War. Despite their service, African American soldiers returning from the war were met with resentment and the white supremacist race riots of the “Red Summer” of 1919.

All of Howard’s cut-out soldiers face forward at attention. On the back of each is a large bulls-eye target. Viewing the soldiers from the back, they are objects devoid of their individual qualities. The artwork illustrates the history and present reality of human bodies, particularly those with dark skin, that are continually dehumanized and in “the line of fire” as targets of violence. The stones, symbols of strength, are piled on the gallery floor in front of the soldiers in a mound. They are at once grave markers and barriers to hide behind. Howard cites the Nina Simone song “Sinnerman,” adapted from an African American spiritual, as an inspiration. In the song, a man runs to a rock only to find he cannot hide. There is no refuge, then or now, for Black men and boys from the violence they face, and Howard’s installation calls on viewers to confront and reflect on racist histories and legacies.

The House That Will Not Pass For Any Color Than Its Own is conjured from Howard’s reservoir of memories, research, and imagination. In the artist’s words, the work is “an unmistakable symbol of home in a city that is sensitive to New York City’s diverse population and celebrates their complex history and multicolored beauty. The House is a bridge to the East and West coasts, the present with the past, and New York City and the world.” Questioning what is required of a house, the roof and walls have large open

9 MILDRED HOWARD IN THE LINE OF FIRE
spaces. Unexpected voids challenge viewers’ expectations and spur questions about the status quo: what does humanity deem acceptable shelter for all people? While The House passes as an unobtrusive building among skyscrapers, on closer observation it appears to float above the ground. It appears solid and conventional, while paradoxically uncertain and incomplete. Many issues concern the artist: injustices based on constructs of race and identity, global migration, housing insecurity. The House creates a place to consider them.

Looking out from inside The House, the panes of glass that make up the structure act as a lens that transforms the environment. When sunlight and refracted light from the Hudson River illuminate the artwork, its royal crimson and purple intensify and viewers’ perspectives change, shifting the inky dark purple of The House to red-violet and the silvery lavender to rosy gold. Colors appear to transform effortlessly, depending on their interaction with light and shadow and with transparent and opaque surfaces. The House’s color is delightfully inconstant due to the artist’s ability to mix pigment and her understanding of refraction.

Preserving history while capturing impermanence is one of several dualities that imbue Howard’s work. Enlarged fragments of historical letters written by travelers from the east migrating to California during the Gold Rush are visible on the glass walls in gold finish in The House. Visitors see their own image reflected in the mirrored strokes, and as they stand straddling real time and the past, their images become fleeting bits that are incorporated into the art. Migration and establishing new community is close to the artist’s life. She is the youngest child of ten, and the only member of her large family who was born in California after the family moved from Galveston, Texas. Vivid stories of another place, time, and people filled her childhood. Her name, favorite recipes, and family traditions carry connections to a distant community that includes ancestors from Germanic, British, and Scandinavian origins who arrived in America by choice, and enslaved West African people from Mali, Benin, and Togo who arrived by force. The House That Will Not Pass For Any Color Than Its Own is a place of wonder and curiosity about home and humanity is a touchstone.\(^1\) Fellow abstract artists Oliver Lee Jackson, Mary Lovelace O’Neal, Betye Saar, DeWayne Crumpler, David Bradford, Howardena Pindell, and Raymond Holbert, whose work references Africanism and the Black Experience, are important influences for Howard, who brings her own vision as an artist and her agency as an activist to these projects. Now, two generations after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s, and the emergence of more women and people of color in literature, and visual and performing arts, Howard persists in giving voice to contradictions, injustices, and inequities. It pains her to witness discrimination against the people who built her multicultural city and the entire San Francisco Bay area. In her eyes, the community’s rich mixture of Latinx, Asian, African American, and European heritage is the source of the area’s vibrancy and creativity. Howard continues to focus relentlessly on the present while reckoning with the past, creating art that sheds light on the human spirit’s vulnerability, resourcefulness, and resiliency.

Interventions grew from conversations about the heightened relevance of public art and its visceral power to express ideas and emotions wordlessly. Battery Park City’s public art collection, including work by Ned Smyth, Mildred Howard, and eighteen others, is integrated into a mixed-use 20th century experiment that is at once an urban park system, residential neighborhood, and business district located across from BMCC, one of New York City’s most pluralistic colleges. In both spaces, students, residents, and visitors speak dozens of languages. Intuitively, public art can communicate with us all. Just as it changes the urban landscape in surprising ways, it also can shift perceptions, invite and enhance imagination, and encourage rethinking.

---


\(^1\) Mildred Howard in interviews with Abby Ehrlich, 2018.
In 1973, Ned Smyth was hitchhiking back to New York after a summer working construction in Aspen, when a pick-up truck pulled over on a New Jersey highway and offered him a ride. The two men in the truck serendipitously turned out to be the artist Keith Sonnier and the musician Dickie Landry. Both were living in downtown Manhattan, and the chance encounter led to Smyth’s introduction to the SoHo/Tribeca arts scene. At their suggestion, Smyth went to Food, the artist-run restaurant and art project founded by Gordon Matta-Clark and Carol Gooden, where he was hired. Smyth then moved to Tribeca (from the Lower East Side), joining a community of painters, sculptors, dancers, musicians, and poets who were developing alternative art practices, as well as spaces in which to show their work. He also helped out at 112 Greene Street, a groundbreaking space for contemporary art that emerged in those years. That arena became, as Smyth notes, his art school, and fellow artists and mentors, including Matta-Clark, Keith Sonnier, Jene Highstein, and Richard Nonas, became close friends. The downtown community was a close-knit and highly collaborative environment in which artists frequently worked together and helped one another. Smyth assisted Matta-Clark on a series of his renowned “Anarchitecture” works, for which Matta-Clark cut out large areas and shaped sections of wall and floor from existing architectural structures that were usually slated for demolition.

Smyth was invited to show his own work at 112 Greene Street later in 1973. He had begun casting concrete two years prior and started showing architectural installations of cement beams cast to look like lengths of standard 2x4 lumber used in construction. The repetition of the arranged 2x4s is emphasized by the ghostly gradation of grays that evoke a structure that is not fully present. Minimalism had been the dominant vocabulary of the period, and Smyth cites Carl Andre’s installations placed directly on floors, as well as Frank Stella’s pared-down, striped black paintings, as deeply influential. However, while the hallmarks of Minimalism (the use of modular units, monochrome, and repetition) were present in Smyth’s earliest works, he did not employ the same rigid structure, depersonalization, and relentless repetition of form. In installations such as Hudson Street 2x4s (1972-93), surfaces are never completely uniform, the gray colors of the concrete are mottled and shifting, and the placement of objects is intuitive rather than formulaic.

Increasingly, Smyth began to synthesize and incorporate the Roman arches, Egyptian capitals, Romanesque columns, as well as the myriad Renaissance structures, sculptures, and paintings he encountered as a youth. His father, the noted art historian Craig Hugh Smyth, divided his time between New Jersey and Italy, and Smyth spent much of his youth in Europe accompanying his father. The classical architecture and sculpture he encountered, the colonnades, arches, and mosaics of Romanesque churches, Gothic cathedrals, and Roman temples, would have a deep impact on him. The concept of mass, in particular, is one he has explored throughout his work, and Smyth was among the early sculptors of the 70s to engage with architectural concepts and build site-specific works, forging a path in large-scale public art installations.

Smyth was invited to show his installation Last Supper in Rooms, Alanna Heiss’s inaugural exhibition at PS1 in 1976, and the following year was awarded his first public art installation. Since then he has completed over thirty large-scale public projects, including The Upper Room (1986; installed 1987) at Battery Park City. As he developed his public art installations, his concrete columns increasingly became embellished with gold and colored mosaic tile, establishing him as a prominent figure in Pattern and Decoration (a movement prominent from the mid-70s through the 80s). Pattern and Decoration artists were championed by gallerist Holly Solomon with whom Smyth first showed in 1975. Artists associated with the movement shifted away from rigid abstraction, embracing instead a more sensual use of texture, color, and decorative patterning. Blurring distinctions between fine art and decorative arts while working against received hierarchies, artists...
frequently adopted an exuberant use of unbridled decoration.

Smyth similarly began to engage in increasingly expressive possibilities, employing motifs derived from the natural world, such as palm leaves and lotus plants, that were stylized into column capitals. Through the use of mosaics, he introduced intricate color and design, as well as figuration, pushing against modernist notions that pattern is non-essential. Combining a fusion of gold and colored ornament, decorative elements derived from nature, art historical references, and non-Western influences, Smyth created multi-layered and expansive installations.

These pluralistic works, frequently created for civic spaces, were aimed at speaking to a wide audience. The Upper Room, created during this period, is situated at the entrance to the Esplanade at Albany Street, in Battery Park City, and is defined by a colonnade and a series of individual columns that frame an internal courtyard or plaza. While open to the elements, the space within feels contained, creating an environment evocative of the ruins of Greek and Roman temples or open amphitheaters. At the center is a long table and stools suggestive of the Last Supper (harkening back to his installation shown at PS1), but the table is adorned with chess boards that invite viewers to sit and play. Red stucco-like pebbles surface the concrete structures and a palm tree at its center housed within a pergola is inlaid with mosaic tile. While evoking a sacred place, the audience is invited to participate in a secular way, creating a space for community engagement. Both serious and playful, open but suggestive of enclosed spaces, rigorous but decorative, Smyth creates an absorbing and eloquent work.

Smyth’s more recent large-scale installations explore natural forms, as opposed to architectural spaces, often on a massive scale. The Next Generation (2012), a monumental sculpture of a rock formation created from dense painted foam, hangs in the atrium of the Science Hall, at Lehman College, CUNY. Embedded in the form is the geologic history of the region, reflecting the disciplines studied in the building that houses it. Throughout the Science Hall, Smyth also installed cell-like images, made from transparent glass, that provide a reflection of microscopic views of biological forms, expanding on the varied fields within scientific study. The work plays with aspects of scale and location, with macro and micro perspectives, and reflects the artist’s explorations, which extend both inward and outward at the same time.

In many ways, Smyth has always had a fascination with stone, space, and scale. He has continuously investigated aspects of process, materiality, and architectonic space, moving back and forth between the creation of outdoor “cloistered spaces” (as he has called them) and his studio work. Unlike the large-scale sites of his public art works, his current studio work is comprised of sculptures and photographs meant to be seen indoors. They are contemplative and reverent in a way that relates directly to his installations; they also continue to reflect his personal history, which in numerous ways has seeped into his work. Smyth left his Tribeca loft in 1994 and moved to the East End of Long Island, eventually settling in Shelter Island, where he currently lives and works. In the process of unpacking and settling into his studio, he discovered that he had boxes of stones that he had been intuitively collecting for years. Smyth became fascinated by the shapes and textures of the stones and their repeated forms became a new vocabulary for the artist. They struck Smyth as reminiscent of the classical sculptures of his youth and he began creating a series that drew inspiration from them. Experimenting further with twigs, large format black and white photographs, as well as cast bronze, urethane foam, and 3-D printing, Smyth began obsessively exploring aspects of definition, material, texture, and scale. In this exhibition, Smyth’s recent sculptures and eight-foot photographs of stones, and his cast bronze sculptures and photographs of twigs, are accompanied by an installation of some of his cast concrete 2x4s from the 70s. As evidenced by the path leading from his earliest work to his most recent, and his side-by-side presentation of them here, Smyth focuses on the balance between nature and culture.
MILDRED HOWARD (b. 1945, San Francisco) lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area. She earned a degree in Fashion Art at the College of Alameda (Alameda, CA) in 1977, and an M.F.A. at John F. Kennedy University (Berkeley, CA) in 1985. Howard's work has been exhibited extensively since the mid-1980s, including solo exhibitions at Franklin Parrasch, New York, NY; Parrasch Heijnen, Los Angeles, CA; Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, CA; Nielsa Gallery, Boston, MA; the African American Cultural Center, Charlotte, NC. Her work has also been included in group exhibitions at the New Museum, New York, NY; Whatcom Museum, Bellingham, WA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Moeller Fine Art, Berlin, Germany; and the Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, NV. Howard has received numerous awards and fellowships, including the Lee Krasner Award (2015) in recognition of a lifetime of artistic achievement; the Nancy Graves Grant for Visual Arts (2017), the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award (2004/5), a fellowship from the California Arts Council (2003), among other awards. Examples of Howard's large-scale installations have been mounted through Creative Time, New York, NY; InSITE, San Diego, CA; Museum of Glass, Tacoma, WA; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; the City of Oakland, CA; and Battery Park City, New York, NY. Howard's works are held in the permanent collections of such institutions as the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, CA; the De Young Museum, San Francisco, CA; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT; and the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA.

NED SMYTH (b. 1948, New York City) was raised in New Jersey and Europe. After graduating from Kenyon College in Ohio, Smyth moved to downtown Manhattan, where he lived and worked for over two decades. He eventually resettled on Shelter Island on the East End of Long Island, where he continues to reside. Smyth began creating site-specific works in the early 70s, and was a pioneer in the field of public art. Since 1977, when Smyth was awarded his first public art installation, he has completed over thirty large-scale public projects. He has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1973, at venues including 112 Greene Street, New York, NY; Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich, Switzerland; Galerie Rudolf Zwirner, Cologne, Germany; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, NY; Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ; MAMCO, Geneva, Switzerland; MOCA, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; PS1, Queens, NY; Salomon Contemporary, New York, NY; the Venice Biennale, Italy; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. His artwork is held in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; and Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA, among others. His public art installations can be found in locations that include Anchorage, Alaska; Brooklyn, NY; Dublin, Ireland; Fort Lauderdale, FL; Philadelphia, PA; Savannah, GA; the US Virgin Islands; and Wilmington, DE.
INTERVENTIONS
JUNE 3 – SEPTEMBER 25, 2021

The Shirley Fiterman Art Center of Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY, is dedicated to organizing exhibitions of contemporary art and cultural programming through which it seeks to promote and enrich the educational mission of BMCC and serve as a resource for the college and Lower Manhattan communities. The Fiterman Art Center believes strongly in the role of education and advocacy through art, including matters of identity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, and in the preservation of the artistic and historic legacies of Tribeca and Lower Manhattan.

Shirley Fiterman Art Center staff:
Lisa Panzera, Director
Elsy Benitez, Curatorial Assistant

Shirley Fiterman Art Center Advisory Board:
Miles Fiterman, Chair
Tracey Bashkoff
Elizabeth Butson
Connie Choi
Ursula Davila-Villa
Eugenia Yau

Artwork information, checklist, and translations of the essays in the following languages can be found at www.bmcc.cuny.edu/sfac

Brochure: Pehrsson Design
© 2021 Shirley Fiterman Art Center, Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY

SHIRLEY FITERMAN ART CENTER
81 Barclay Street
New York, NY 10007
212.776.6238
bmcc.cuny.edu/sfac
MILDRED HOWARD
IN THE LINE OF FIRE

NED SMYTH
MOMENTS OF MATTER AND LIFE

SHIRLEY FITERMAN ART CENTER
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE, CUNY