

REGARDING *PORTRAIT OF A PHENOMENAL WOMAN: A PROPOSAL FOR A SCULPTURE HONORING DR. MAYA ANGELOU FOR THE SAN FRANCISCO MAIN LIBRARY* BY LAVA THOMAS

August 26, 2019

“Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women.”

-Dr. Maya Angelou

“My mother would like to be remembered as a woman who stood for justice.”

-Guy Johnson (Spoken during the project’s orientation, in answer to my question: How would your mother like to be remembered? April 9, 2019)

TO MEMBERS OF THE SFAC’S VISUAL ARTS COMMITTEE:

On August 9th my proposal, *Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman*, received first-place ranking for the *Sculpture Honoring Dr. Maya Angelou for the San Francisco Main Library* project by the selection committee. You can imagine my elation upon receiving this news. Illuminating the labor of women who fight for justice and equity in all forms is at the core of my studio practice, and I worked hard to give the city of San Francisco a “contemporary”, “forward-looking” monument, as expressed in SFGATE’s 11/29/18 article publicizing the project.

Imagine my shock when I received a call on August 22nd, telling me that the sponsors of the project have a “strong preference” for another proposal – a design that is problematic on several points, as it “inappropriately” and “inaccurately” represents Dr. Angelou, according to an audio recording of the Visual Arts Committee’s 8/21 meeting. Imagine also my disbelief upon hearing the suggestion that our two proposals be redesigned and resubmitted and presented to the Visual Arts Committee again, when my proposal has already received top ranking by a wide margin. I was also told that the sponsors prefer a “figurative” artwork, but when this point was brought up during the project’s orientation meeting on 4/9, we finalists were assured that “a reasonable representation” of Dr. Angelou would suffice.

It seems that any excuse to undo the selection panel’s choice is sufficient: the audio from the 8/21 meeting refers repeatedly to a public preference for the second-place proposal, despite the MOU specifically stating that the selection is not determined by public comment. It was also suggested at the meeting that the other proposal must be deserving of reconsideration due to having placed second – though by that logic, strictly by the numbers, my proposal was nearly twice as deserving. These are all attempts to lend the appearance of credibility to efforts to scuttle my winning proposal. If the project sponsors wanted a particular style, explicit design parameters should have been communicated

before we finalists began working on our proposals. If the project sponsors wanted a particular artist, that artist should have been commissioned outright.

Artists trust the integrity of the selection process when we apply for grants, commissions, residencies, exhibitions and awards. We understand that during selection panel deliberations many factors may affect the outcome, but once the selection is made, that selection is inviolate. Revisiting a panel's selection because project sponsors don't like it is unheard of.

I'm aware that the Visual Arts Committee retains the option not to put forward the panel's recommendation; I'm also aware that, according to institutional memory, the Committee has not exercised that discretion in the past nine years. Beyond the significant disrespect to me and my work, disregarding the panel's selection at the insistence of anonymous back channel political forces corrupts a selection process that is supposed to be transparent and democratic and sets a dangerous precedent for the integrity of this initiative going forward.

As this country contends with the problematic history of its monuments, all eyes are on San Francisco. It will be an embarrassment to the city if the inaugural commission from the Women's Recognition Public Art Fund is taken from a woman with deep roots in the Bay Area arts community and given to a male artist from New York. The hypocrisy - honoring a woman of color who was a champion for justice with a monument meant to inspire young women and girls, while working covertly to deny the woman selected to create that monument - is outrageous. It's unconscionable that the process of choosing the artist to honor Dr. Angelou's legacy should be tainted with an impropriety antithetical to the principles of equity and justice that Dr. Angelou stood for.

So many working women have remained silent when subjected to injustice for fear of backlash and reprisals. This is especially true for artists, as we often rely on support and funding to realize our projects. I speak for all women who have been treated unjustly, and in the spirit of Dr. Angelou, will not sit silently by. I urge you not to let political maneuvering corrupt a fair and transparent selection process, and to reconsider your positions moving forward.

Sincerely,
Lava Thomas
Visual Artist

March 4, 2020

To the Attention of the Legislative Sponsors of Ordinance 243-18, entitled, "Affirming San Francisco's Commitment to 30% Female Representation in the Public Realm by the year 2020": Mayor London Breed, Supervisor Stefani, Supervisor Ronen, Former Supervisor Kim, Supervisor Brown, Former Supervisor Cohen, Supervisor Fewer, and Former Supervisor Tang; Kanishka Karunaratne Cheng and Margaux J. Kelly, Former Legislative Aides to Former Supervisor Mark Farrell; the San Francisco Arts Commission; the San Francisco Visual Arts Committee; the San Francisco Library Commission; and the 2020 Review Panel for the Reissued RFQ for a Sculpture Honoring Dr. Maya Angelou for the San Francisco Main Library:

I am writing to withdraw my 2019 submission from the application pool for the 2020 reissued RFQ for a Sculpture Honoring Dr. Maya Angelou for the San Francisco Main Library. I do not grant SFAC permission to include my application for consideration in the new RFQ for the following reasons:

1. I withdraw in protest of the Visual Art Committee's refusal, under political pressure, to approve the selection panel's nomination of my proposal during the August 21, 2019 and October 16, 2019 VAC meetings. My proposal received almost unanimous top ranking by an independent and impartial selection panel, in a public process that was transparent and democratic. My proposal adhered to the stated project goals of the original RFQ, the legislation that created the commission (Ordinance 243-18), and the guidelines set forth by the SFAC's Memorandum of Understanding, signed by me and the SFAC in good faith. These documents make no mention of a project sponsor to which the VAC must defer, or a project sponsor with the power to undermine the selection panel's choice.¹
2. I withdraw in protest of Supervisor Catherine Stefani's demand, made during the 10/16 VAC meeting, that the project be closed and reopened because her preferred proposal did not win. That political power intervened to prevent my proposal from advancing is an abuse of power and a mockery of due process.
3. I withdraw in protest of Stefani's rejection of my proposal and her view that my work didn't conform to the legislation's intent. Stefani's insistence that Dr. Angelou be

¹ While the MOU states that "implementation of the selected artist's proposal is entirely at the discretion of the Arts Commission," nowhere is it stated that the VAC serves as a mediating body between higher level city officials and SFAC staff; nor is it stated that the VAC operates under the direction of project sponsors when exercising such discretion.

honored with a traditional statue, “in the same way that [white] men have been historically elevated in this city” is a narrow and flawed interpretation of the legislation, which has “statue” crossed out and “artwork” written in its place.² Stefani’s interpretation weaponizes a European figurative convention of statuary to dismiss the work of artists and selection panelists whose vision did not conform to this hegemonic standard. To assert that a eurocentric artistic tradition, steeped in histories of colonial violence, is the only “right” form of representation at the exclusion of all other representational forms, upholds the patriarchal status quo and reinforces systemic and institutionalized racism. That Supervisor Stefani, a representative of the most conservative and segregated district in San Francisco, is empowered to dictate how Dr. Angelou should be represented in the public realm is deeply problematic. Her assertions perpetuate the erasure of black women’s creative and intellectual labor and are an affront to those of us who hoped to honor Dr. Angelou with a forward-looking monument grounded in an ethos of inclusion and Black aesthetics.

4. I withdraw in protest of Supervisor Stefani’s disrespectful behavior during the 10/16 meeting, which was particularly offensive to the black women artists, selection panelists, arts professionals, and cultural workers who were in attendance. Stefani made a brief appearance, issued her statement and left before hearing public comments. She was not present to listen to a letter written by Dr. Angelou’s son, Guy Johnson, which supported the democratic process by which my proposal was selected, even though my proposal was not his first choice. She did not listen to me or other members of the Bay Area arts community who attended the meeting to voice our concerns.
5. I withdraw in protest of the glaring contradiction between the legislation’s stated mission and the actions taken to fulfill that mission. Ensuring that “voices of the minority group become heard in their own right,” (Ordinance No. 243-18, Section 2.C) requires listening to, valuing, and respecting those voices, which the legislative sponsors of this project have thus far failed to do. The legislative sponsors pay lip service to an ideal of gender and racial inclusion while perpetuating the harm they purport to rectify.
6. I withdraw in protest of the SFAC’s attempt to rewrite this narrative in letters stating that the VAC rejected all finalists proposals, omitting the fact that my proposal was

² From Stefani’s statement, issued at the October 16, 2019 public VAC meeting. See “Proposals for sculptures to honor Maya Angelou meet with rejection,” by Joshua Sabatini, SF Examiner, October 16, 2019 (<https://www.sfexaminer.com/news/proposals-for-statues-to-honor-maya-angelou-meet-with-rejection/>)

selected, and implying that there was no winner of the competition for this commission.

7. I withdraw in protest of SFAC's policies which outline a power dynamic that disadvantages artists, leaving us no recourse in the wake of this injustice. Demands for transparency have been unmet, and requests for further information, through the Sunshine Ordinance, remain withheld.
8. I withdraw in protest of the hypocrisy of claiming to honor a truly exceptional Black woman who would not have stood for how this fiasco unfolded. Reissuing a new RFQ under these terms is an insult to Dr. Angelou's remarkable legacy as a celebrated writer, author, artist and activist, and to the principles of equity, integrity, and justice that Dr. Angelou advocated for.

And finally, I want to acknowledge the professionalism and caring manner by which the SFAC staff conducted the selection process for the original 2019 RFQ. It was only when the project left the staff's purview and became subject to actions by politicians and political appointees that mismanagement, controversy, and erroneous practices ensued.

Sincerely,
Lava Thomas
Visual Artist

July 29, 2020

To the SF Arts Commission regarding the 2019 RFQ for a Sculpture to Honor Dr. Maya Angelou for the San Francisco Library:

As monuments to white supremacy are being toppled around the country, as part of a global reckoning with the myriad ways in which violence is enacted upon Black Lives, institutions and organizations are being called upon to acknowledge their own culpability and take restorative action.

I require Redress and Restorative Justice for the gross mishandling of the 2019 RFQ for a Sculpture to Honor Dr. Angelou for the SF Main Library, and the egregious way in which my winning proposal was rejected after it was selected by arts professionals in a process that was democratic, independent, and transparent.

A monument to Dr. Angelou cannot be built on the backs of Black women artists and arts professionals who have been dismissed, deceived, and used as pawns in political maneuvers to control the outcome of the 2019 RFQ. Therefore, the reissued 2020 RFQ for a Statue to Honor Dr. Maya Angelou must be suspended until the 2019 RFQ is addressed and actions toward Redress and Restorative Justice are made. Redress and Restorative Justice are crucial so that the process to honor Dr. Angelou will reflect the principles and ideals that epitomize her life and work: JUSTICE, INTEGRITY, COURAGE, FREEDOM, and a life-long commitment to END WHITE SUPREMACY. Redress and Restorative Justice are also critical to allow us to unite as a community to celebrate Dr. Angelou's life when a monument to honor her is finally realized. Dr. Angelou's extraordinary legacy deserves no less than this.

Actions toward Redress, Restorative Justice, and accountability. This list is not in order of priority - all points are important.

1. A public apology from the Visual Arts Committee to myself, the finalists and selection panelists of the 2019 RFQ for perpetuating the systemic racism inherent in Supervisor Stefani's demand that Dr. Angelou be honored with a statue based on Eurocentric aesthetics "in the same way that [white] men have historically elevated in the city". This standard is steeped in histories of colonial violence and was weaponized to reject my winning proposal, which was grounded in an ethos of inclusion and Black aesthetics.

2. The Arts Commission stop prioritizing Eurocentric aesthetics to represent Black Women in the Public Realm, and adopt industry wide practices covered in the Americans for the Arts' report Cultural Equity in the Public Art Field.*

3. Dorka Keehn issue a public apology and step down as VAC Chair. Despite Ms. Keehn's early support and advocacy of my proposal last year, her refusal to let me finish my statement after I was cut off during the 7/15 VAC meeting demonstrates a failure to recognize that Black and

Brown voices must be respected and heard. That Ms. Keehn became more adamant in her refusal, after an uproar ensued and several commenters requested that I be allowed to speak, reveals an investment in white privilege and power that has no place in Arts Commission leadership.

4. An explanation outlining how this debacle unfolded and the disclosure of ALL legislative sponsors and elected officials who were responsible for blocking my winning proposal. Disclosure of the fiscal sponsors of the project - specifically, what individuals, organizations and foundations contributed to the Women's Recognition Public Art Fund, as requested via the sunshine ordinance.

5. Arts Commission Leadership advocate for and arrange a meeting with Mayor London Breed and core members of seeblackwomxn collective to understand her role in the 2019 RFQ. Arts Commission Leadership also advocate on my behalf for a public apology from Supervisor Stefani.

6. Commissioners and staff prioritize and participate in Racial and Cultural Equity training and adopt practices that reflect the SFAC's Racial and Cultural Equity statements.

7. Increase diversity at the SFAC. Hire a person of color as Director of Cultural Affairs. Appoint a Black woman to the Arts Commission and the Visual Arts Committee. Hire people of color to the SFAC staff - specifically more Black women.

8. The Arts Commission and Visual Arts Committee must remain independent and autonomous to administer public art selection processes without interference from elected officials and other non-arts professionals. Autonomy is vital so that this fiasco is not repeated, and other artists are not harmed. Adopt Americans for the Arts Proposed Best Practices for Public Art Projects.**

9. My correspondence to the VAC and the Arts Commission become part of the public record. This includes my 8/26/19 letter to the VAC, my withdrawal statement of 3/4/20 (attached), my statement of 7/15/20 and this letter, dated 7/29/20. All public apologies become part of the public record.

*Highlights of relevant sections from [Cultural Equity in Public Art Report](#):

Emerging artists, artists of color, and even those who have experience in the field confront challenges such as biases when applying for public art commissions. There are several barriers to artists seeking opportunity and advancement in the public art industry. Some of these include biases in artists eligibility, such as educational backgrounds, experience, location, the contracting process and language, and budgetary timelines (Page 7)

For centuries in the U.S., a white, Eurocentric beauty was, and in many ways still is, considered the normative comparison for what is aesthetically good or pleasing. Typically derived from the tastes of, and

informed by the philosophies of, ancient Greece and their derivations, this aesthetic has prevailed as the standard in the arts and has been coded into the public art field. (page 8)

With such a lack of awareness, any artwork coming from a marginalized, colonized, or disadvantaged culture has been subjected to harsh criticism for its perceived ignorance or misapplication of the Eurocentric standard and its acceptable variations. (page 9)

***Highlights of relevant sections from [“Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change”](#)**

In the U.S., evaluative practices—from academia to professional art criticism, to funding panels— have historically been dominated by Euro-American values, and the terms “aesthetics” and “aesthetic excellence” are often used to privilege white Eurocentric standards of beauty, while dismissing or ignoring standards relevant to different artistic and cultural practices. (page 6)

****Highlights of relevant sections from [“Proposed Best Practices for Public Art Projects](#)**

The items below are from the Public Art Best Practices Document: a list of best practices developed by Americans for the Arts Public Art Network Advisory Council in 2016.

Number 11 - To avoid actual conflict or the appearance of impropriety, real or perceived conflicts of interest should be disclosed, and impacted decision-makers should abstain from involvement in the process.

Number 6 - Administrators should ensure a legal and fair process for developing projects and selecting Artists.

Number 9 -Arts professionals should be involved in the Artist selection process.

Sincerely,
Lava Thomas
Visual Artist