

Wooden Melania Trump statue replaced with bronze after arson attack

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A bronze statue of the US first lady, Melania Trump, has been unveiled near her hometown in Slovenia, to replace a wooden carving of her that was burnt in an arson attack two months ago.

The new work – like the original – is a collaboration between Brad Downey, a Berlin-based artist from Louisville, Kentucky, and a local craftsman, Ales “Maxi” Zuperc, who have invited residents of Melania’s hometown of Sevnica to see the work in nearby Rozno, south-eastern Slovenia.

The bronze likeness has been placed on the same tree stump where the wooden statue stood before it was badly damaged. Modelled on the previous design, Downey has said he hopes it will now be harder to destroy.



▲ Ales Zuperc, the local craftsman who carved the first statue using a chainsaw, unveils the new bronze. Photograph: Borut Zivulovic/Reuters

Downey had called the burning of the original sculpture symbolic of “political tensions” in the US and “conceptualised as criticism” of Donald Trump’s politics.

The new figure had been designed to be “as solid as possible, out of a durable material which cannot be wantonly destroyed”, he told the German art magazine *Monopol* in July.

Downey also defended himself against accusations that he sanctioned the burning of the wooden statue as part of his artistic process. “I neither set fire to the statue, nor did I commission anyone to do so.”

The charred and blistered remains of the wooden artwork by Zupevc, which was unveiled in July 2019, went on show at an art gallery in the Slovenian beach resort of Koper earlier this month.

Called Fuck Off Illusion, the exhibition also presented the mould for the latest bronze version.

The curator, Karlo Hmeljak, said the exhibition presented “all the incarnations of this contradiction that is called Melania” and said “it’s not the final word of what Melania will become in the future”, in what art critics took to be a strong hint that further artistic interpretations may be planned.

The wooden sculpture was torched on 4 July, which is Independence Day in the US. Police are reportedly yet to find the perpetrators.

Zupevc said he and Melania Trump were born in the same hospital and he had been inspired to carve the sculpture from the remains of a linden tree.



▲ Donald and Melania Trump during the US president’s inaugural parade. Photograph: Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images

Zupevc said in a documentary film by Downey on the making of the statue: “I plugged in my angle grinder ... I worked and made mistakes ... finished the hair ... the eyes and all. Then I called my brother, who said: ‘Spitting image of our waitress.’ And so it was,” he said, referring to Trump’s former waiting job before she emigrated to the US.

The resulting statue, which Zupevc created with a chainsaw and sanded with a power tool, carving around a life-size photo template of the waving first lady at her husband's inauguration, had been described as rustic and naive with expressionist facial features.

But the artwork was ridiculed on social media and by some locals, drawing comparisons variously with a smurf, a scarecrow and the Virgin Mary, with some arguing the only resemblance between the figure and the real-life person was the depiction of the duck-egg blue woollen coat she wore at the inauguration ceremony.