

Melania Trump bronze replaces wooden statue damaged by arsonists

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Written by By Jack Guy, CNN

A bronze statue of Melania Trump has been put up near her hometown in Slovenia to replace a wooden version which was damaged in an arson attack in July.

Artist Brad Downey unveiled the bronze statue Tuesday near Sevnica, the small town in central Slovenia where the US First Lady grew up.

Downey told CNN that he had always intended to make a bronze version of the statue to exhibit in an institutional setting, but decided to put it to replace the wooden sculpture after it was badly burned.

"I didn't think it was a good ending for the artwork, I didn't think it was a good ending for the community," he said, referring to the arson attack.

Downey explained that the local residents had been very supportive of the work, and he had installed the bronze as a "donation" to them.

The work is inspired by propaganda monuments, such as those installed by Russian Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin after the 1917 Revolution, said Downey, stating that the wooden sculpture was "a monument that critiqued monumentalism."

Downey commissioned the wooden sculpture from local conceptual artist Ales Zupevc, better known as Maxi, who was born in the same hospital and the same year as Melania.

While Zupevc was not involved in making the bronze, Downey did invite him to unveil it at a ceremony Tuesday.

Local police did not find out who burned the original sculpture, leading to speculation that Downey or his associates were responsible.

"I didn't do it," he told CNN. "I loved it."

Downey emphasized that he had been careful to prevent images of the burned sculpture from circulating in order to prevent the artwork becoming part of the political discourse around monuments in the US.

"If I'd been it I would have let people take photos of it," he said. "I removed it quickly so it didn't enter a dark narrative."

The burned statue is currently on display as part of an exhibition in the Slovenian town of Kroper, titled "F**k Off Illusion," which runs until the end of the month.

Downey has also installed a memorial plaque at the site in Sevnica, with text in both Slovenian and English and a QR code that links to the documentary he filmed with Zupevc as part of the artwork.

Downey previously told CNN that he was inspired to create the piece due to what he called the "anti-immigration narrative" coming out of the US and from Donald Trump in particular.

He said it was a "contradiction" that the US President, who has made halting immigration a cornerstone of his presidency, is married to an immigrant whose first language is not English.

Sevnica is a sleepy town of 5,000 that has profited from its most famous daughter, placing itself firmly on the tourist trail and selling a range of Melania-themed products including honey, chocolate and cake.