

Brad Downey Creates a Bronze Melania Trump Monument in Her Native Slovenia

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In the midst of toppling and preserving monuments, Kentucky-born and Berlin-based artist Brad Downey can claim involvement in creating TWO statues of Melania Trump. Downey, featured in our Winter 2019 issue, recently made worldwide media headlines

when unveiling a bronze iteration of the First Lady Melania Trump. Another important chapter in the multi-media artist's opus, this continues a multi-faceted project started several years ago in Ms. Trump's native Slovenia, an example of Downey's penchant to imbue humor and pathos in his public art.

Motivated by "frustrations with the policies of my birth country," as stated in the Guardian earlier this month, the bronze sculpture is actually a complement to a sculpture he commissioned a few years back. And as with most of Downey's work, there is a larger story that needs to be told for the work to be fully understood and appreciated. The story of his project in Melania's hometown of Sevnica in southeastern Slovenia begins when he started searching for a local artist to create a sculpture of the US First Lady. Among the applicants, he selected Aleš "Maxi" Župevc, a professional pipe layer with no academic art school background, who makes folk art in the form of chainsaw sculptures for pleasure during his very limited free time. As it turns out, Maxi was born the same month, same day, same year, and same birth hospital as the most famous Slovenian living in the US, a fellow Slovenian whom the sculptor admirably described as a simple girl from a working-class family like himself.

For this work made in Slovenia, Downey wanted to create a distance between himself and the piece, purchasing a tree from which the sculpture would be carved, including the plot of land on which it would be placed. He left it to Maxi to create the work, and the entire process was filmed and later released as 12min Melania, a film, planned as a series, that, also movingly portrays a man struggling to make art and make a living. A year or so after the sculpture had been erected, the artist organized an official reveal, and the media picked up the story about a folk art piece seemingly commemorating the moment she became the first lady. "On the one hand were people criticizing me, asking: 'why have you monumentalized this woman?', on the other, were people saying 'she's far better looking than that,'" the artist says about the flurry of hate mail he received afterward.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/5tY62-dSx40>

Since its official reveal, the wooden sculpture was badly damaged in an apparent arson attack, so the artist decided to create a bronze replica, again causing an avalanche of mixed reactions, starting with the municipality of Sevnica who stated that the sculpture "does not correspond to our values of cultivating feelings of respect to our fellow human beings." As for Downey, the motivation to continue this work is clear - the work represents the contradictions of her husband's presidency. "On the one hand we have people being held in cages on the US border with Mexico, on the other, in what is to me a clear contradiction, we have a first lady who is the first-ever for whom English is not her mother tongue, whose US citizenship was fast-tracked on a visa reserved for immigrants with extraordinary ability. At the same time, her husband is xenophobic, anti-Islamic. I felt I could isolate this contradiction and make a portrait of it." The original, now torched wooden sculpture is part of Downey's Fuck Off Illusion exhibition which closes today at Libertas in Koper, Slovenia. —*Sasha Bogojev*