

A Folk Art Sculpture of Melania Trump Has Been Resurrected in Bronze After Critics Torched the Original Wood Carving

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The US artist Brad Downey says he sees his sculpture as an "anti-monument."

Naomi Rea, September 16, 2020



A bronze replica depicting US First Lady Melania Trump, made by US artist Brad Downey, is seen after its unveiling in a field near US First Lady's hometown Sevnica. Photo by Jure Makovec/AFP via Getty Images.

An artist has installed a bronze sculpture of the US First Lady Melania Trump in a field near her hometown in Slovenia. The statue is based on a wood carving commissioned from a local craftsman last year, and has been cast in bronze after arsonists torched the original.

The wooden sculpture was created last summer at the direction of Berlin-based artist Brad Downey, who is from Kentucky. Downey enlisted a local self-taught woodworker, Ales "Maxi" Zuperc, to create the rough-hewn folk sculpture in the Slovenian town of Rožno, not far from the First Lady's birthplace of Sevnica.

Arsonists targeted the wooden monument two months ago on July 4, amid fiery political tensions surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement in Europe and the US, and various protests surrounding problematic historical monuments. The motive of the vandals remains unclear.

Speaking to Artnet News, Downey explains that the monument was originally intended as a larger critique of the political situation happening in his birth country and around the world, rather than a straightforward tribute to the First Lady. The artist says that it was a comment on the “contradictions existing in Melania,” an immigrant First Lady who doesn’t speak English as a first language, and who is married to a president whose policies on immigration are very extreme.

The nine-foot-tall sculpture depicts Melania in the dress she wore to her husband’s inauguration. Downey found the sculptor by visiting the hospital where the First Lady was born, and looking for someone born around the same time in April whose life had taken a very different trajectory. As the woodworker Maxi puts it in a [video created by the artist](#), he “works like a drudge for peanuts,” whereas Melania is a “simple woman” who “owns half of America.”



Slovenian artist Ales “Maxi” Zupc (L) and US conceptual artist Brad Downey in front of the sculpture. Photo by Jure Makovec/AFP via Getty Images.

“I wanted to create a broader portrait of her to represent my frustration with Trump’s blatant anti-immigration, xenophobic, propagandistic positioning,” Downey says.

He adds that this second iteration in bronze has taken on new meaning in the wake of Black Lives Matter demonstrations around the world and the dismantling of historical monuments. He chose bronze, the symbolic material of traditional monuments, to resurrect the sculpture as a sort of “anti-monument” to the current political climate.

The charred remains of the original artwork are on view in in a former salt warehouse in the Slovenian coastal town of Koper, as part of Downey’s latest exhibition “Fuck off Illusion.”

The artist says he hopes the bronze version will be more difficult to destroy, and that he felt it was important to cast the sculpture more permanently in order to “keep the discussion going” and to “show respect” for the local community that had supported his project.