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GRAND GESTURE

Governors Island becomes New York's latest public art canvas.

BY TRACY ZWICK



Five ambitious new works, including four quintessential Mark Handforth objects and a permanent sound installation by Susan Philipsz, await visitors to Governors Island, the former military base that's become a green oasis for New Yorkers. Tom Eccles, executive director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, has organized a public art program for the island that eschews the "fencing off and manicuring" of the visual landscape in favor of a spirit of freedom and interactivity. Sculpture intermingles with a new grove of hammocks, ball fields, a formal garden, spray showers and concessions. Visitors "will be astonished," Eccles expects.

Handforth's totem-like contributions include *Painted Phone*, a 30-foot bronze tree cradling a powder blue aluminum handset between its lopped-off branches. "I wanted to compose in my own vocabulary using iconographic phrases I like to work with," explains the Miami-based artist. A signature twisted hangar large enough for gaggles of visitors

to stand on or hang from frames the Statue of Liberty, while a glossy 9-foot-tall *Saffron Star* foregrounds an industrial stretch of Red Hook shoreline. Handforth's works—including his human-scale cast-iron molten hydrant—will be exhibited at least through 2015.

"Everything rusts so beautifully on the island in the salty air," Handforth says, noting that the bronze tree and *Weeping Hydrant* are unpainted, so they'll evolve texturally and chromatically. "I wanted these works to be really strong and in the thick of everything, with no barriers or pedestals. I didn't want to be standoffish, so the work is playful yet has a bit of critique, too. It's jaunty and a little rakish and wrong. I hope people will engage with and respond to it."

Philipsz, who won the 2010 Turner Prize, isolated notes from the taps military bugle call for her sound sculpture *Day is Done*. One note plays from each of four speakers situated around a new 30-acre park and Yankee Pier, where ferries launch. Ec-

cles says visitors are always conscious of when the last boat off the island is. The piece by Philipsz plays hauntingly an hour before the final boat departs at 6 p.m. "It's a great sculpture for Governors Island," Eccles notes. "It heightens awareness of the landscape and the island's military history. You think at first it might be foghorns from the river—it's everywhere and nowhere."

The public art program will "absolutely be evolving," Eccles confirms. The English artist Rachel Whiteread, also a former Turner Prize winner, has been commissioned to create what Eccles describes as "a weird hunting cabin, halfway between Thoreau and the Unabomber." The interior concrete cast of a wooden shed will be sited amid brambles atop a hill in 2015. "It'll be a bit attractive and also a bit creepy," he says, adding, "This environment is truly living, growing and transforming. What you see today is not what you'll see in five years, and that is what's so interesting about creating on Governors Island."