HIGH MUSEUM OF ART ATLANTA

Press Release

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HIGH MUSEUM OF ART TO PRESENT ACCLAIMED RETROSPECTIVE FOR PREEMINENT ARTIST MARTIN PURYEAR

Exhibition features more than 70 works, including many of Puryear's best-known sculptures and rarely seen drawings

"Martin Puryear: Nexus"
Sept. 25, 2026-Jan. 17, 2027

Martin Puryear (American, born Washington, DC, 1941), "Big Phrygian," 2010-2014, painted red cedar, Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland. Photo by Ron Amstutz. © Martin Puryear, courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery.

ATLANTA, April 29, 2026 — Since the 1970s, Martin Puryear (American, born 1941) has captivated the public with beautiful and thought-provoking works inspired by global culture, social history and the natural world. This fall, the High Museum of Art will be the exclusive Southeast venue for **"Martin Puryear: Nexus"** (Sept. 25, 2026-Jan. 17, 2027), the most comprehensive presentation of his career in more than two decades. The exhibition features more than 70 works in a rich variety of materials and media, from sculptures in wood, glass, marble and cast bronze to rarely shown drawings and prints. Critically acclaimed during presentations by its co-organizers, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Cleveland Museum of Art, the exhibition makes its final stop in Atlanta.

"In addition to their elegant forms, which are incredible to experience from a purely aesthetic perspective, Puryear's sculptures importantly invite the viewer to consider the stories and histories held within them," said Rand Suffolk, the High's director. "They also complement many of the contemporary and abstract works featured in our collection."

The exhibition follows Puryear's explorations of form, material and process over the past 50 years, ranging from drawings he made in Sierra Leone during his service in the Peace Corps to sculptures featured in "Liberty/Libertà," his celebrated U.S. Pavilion exhibition at the 2019 Venice Biennale. "Nexus" presents a fresh perspective on Puryear's influential work, illuminating his interest in and involvement with material culture, craft traditions, African American history and science. It also powerfully reveals the expressive and interpretive potential of his work, which commands attention and reflection through masterful craft, enigmatic form and quiet poetic beauty.

Highlights of the exhibition include:

- **"Self"** (1978): Puryear's iconic sculpture "Self" shows the importance of formal opposition in his work. Despite its appearance as a solid, heavy mass, "Self" is light and hollow, with an unobservable interior volume. Puryear assembled it piece by piece using cold molding, a technique he learned through his study of boatbuilding and has used in making some of his most celebrated sculptures.

- **"Bower"** (1980): In this sculpture, loosely woven strips of spruce and pine delineate a large, open volume. "Bower" is the first of multiple sculptures in which Puryear uses intertwined lines to define a space. This technique evokes basket making, an art form Puryear has long admired. The sculpture is also inspired by the 1430 drawing of a chalice by Florentine Renaissance painter and mathematician Paolo Uccello (1397-1475), in which a dense network of lines animates a three-dimensional form.

- **"Alien Huddle"** (1993-1995): Puryear constructed this sculpture's three interlocking spheres using the cold molding technique evident in "Self." The sculpture's appearance shifts depending on the viewer's position and perspective in relation to the work: As one moves around it, different spherical segments come in and out of view, revealing the many ideas a single object can inspire.

- **"Big Phrygian"** (2010-2014): This sculpture culminates Puryear's sustained engagement with the Phrygian cap, a headdress that signified formerly enslaved people in ancient Rome and later became a symbol of resistance against persecution during the French and American Revolutions.

- **"Aso Oke"** (2019): This monumental cast-bronze sculpture borrows its form from the "fila gobi," a ceremonial cap worn by Yoruba men of Nigeria. The intricate open latticework is a recurring form in Puryear's body of work.

- **"A Column for Sally Hemings"** (2021): Puryear produced this work for the U.S. Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale. The work's fluted base echoes the Doric columns at the entrance of the Palladian-style pavilion — which was modeled on Monticello, the primary residence and plantation of Thomas Jefferson. The sculpture's title refers to

Sally Hemings (1773-1835), the enslaved Black woman with whom Jefferson had at least six children.

The exhibition also features a film about Puryear's most recent outdoor work, "Lookout" (2023), a permanent site-specific commission for the Storm King Art Center, along with archival materials that document other public commissions. Together, they reveal how Puryear extends his studio practice into the public realm and demonstrates his commitment to craft and concept on a monumental scale.

"A canonical artist of his generation, Puryear has produced a body of work that remains fiercely independent from artistic currents of the past 50 years, yet rooted in our common cultural heritage, often expressed in craft — the art of the hand," said Michael Rooks, the High's Wieland Family senior curator of modern and contemporary art. "The High is proud to present this exhibition, and our audience will appreciate how Puryear honors handmade and craft traditions that often relate to the South. At the same time, his reverence for the dignity of his subjects like the upright and alert posture of a falcon, or history's hidden figures like Jim Beckworth and Sally Hemmings, establishes an open-ended field of inquiry that connects form and materiality to the richness of conscious experience."

"Martin Puryear: Nexus" will be presented in the Cousins Family Special Exhibition Galleries on the Second Level of the High's Wieland Pavilion. The presenting curator for this exhibition at the High is Michael Rooks, Wieland Family senior curator of modern and contemporary art.

Exhibition Catalogue

"Martin Puryear: Nexus" is accompanied by an expansive and richly illustrated catalogue. Designed and published by the Cleveland Museum of Art, and distributed by Yale University Press, the publication features five essays by a new generation of scholars: Rizvana Bradley, Michelle Millar Fisher, Joan Kee, Emily Liebert and Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi. Also included are responses to individual works, contributed by a range of thinkers and makers, many of whom are long-time interlocutors of the artist: Nairy Baghramian, Alex Da Corte, Thelma Golden, Maya Lin, Kerry James Marshall, Julia Phillips, Charles Ray and Billie Tsien. Alongside these contemporary perspectives, the catalogue features archival materials that have never been published. Principal support for the exhibition catalogue is provided by the Glenstone Foundation.

About Martin Puryear

Over the past five decades, Martin Puryear has created a body of work based on abstract organic forms rich with psychological, cultural and historical references. His labor-intensive sculptures are made by hand at his studio in upstate New York. They combine practices adapted from many different traditions, including wood carving, joinery and boatbuilding, as well as more recent technology. As a student, Puryear studied ornithology, falconry and archery, and in the 1960s, he volunteered with the Peace Corps in West Africa, where he was exposed to the region's Indigenous crafts. Since then, he has continued to travel extensively, observing a range of cultures and their unique approaches to object making. "I think there are a number of levels at which my work can be dealt with and appreciated," he has said. "It gives me

pleasure to feel there's a level that doesn't require knowledge of or immersion in the aesthetic of a given time or place."

Exhibition Organization and Support

"Martin Puryear: Nexus" is co-organized by The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Cleveland Museum of Art. Generous support is provided by the late Agnes Gund, the Henry Luce Foundation, the Terra Foundation for American Art and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Principal support for the exhibition catalogue is provided by the Glenstone Foundation. This exhibition is made possible by Premier Exhibition Series Sponsor Delta Air Lines, Inc.; Premier Exhibition Series Supporters Sarah and Jim Kennedy; Major Exhibition Series Supporter The Fay S. and W. Barrett Howell Family Foundation; Major Exhibition Series Sponsor Harry Norman Realtors; Benefactor Exhibition Series Supporters Robin and Hilton Howell; Ambassador Exhibition Series Supporters Loomis Foundation, Sara and Paul Steinfeld and Mrs. Harriet H. Warren; and Contributing Exhibition Series Supporters Mary and Neil Johnson, Mr. and Mrs. Baxter Jones, Megan and Garrett Langley, Margot and Danny McCaul, Wade A. Rakes II and Nicholas Miller, Louise Sams and Jerome Grilhot, and Lisa Cannon Taylor and Chuck Taylor. Generous support is also provided by Alfred and Adele Davis Exhibition Endowment Fund, Anne Cox Chambers Exhibition Fund, Barbara Stewart Exhibition Fund, Dorothy Smith Hopkins Exhibition Endowment Fund, Eleanor McDonald Storza Exhibition Endowment Fund, The Fay and Barrett Howell Exhibition Fund, Forward Arts Foundation Exhibition Endowment Fund, Helen S. Lanier Endowment Fund, John H. and Wilhelmina D. Harland Exhibition Endowment Fund, Katherine Murphy Riley Special Exhibition Endowment Fund, Margaretta Taylor Exhibition Fund and RJR Nabisco Exhibition Endowment Fund.

About the High Museum of Art

Located in the heart of Atlanta, the High Museum of Art connects with audiences from across the Southeast and around the world through its distinguished collection, dynamic schedule of special exhibitions and engaging community-focused programs. Housed within facilities designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architects Richard Meier and Renzo Piano, the High features a collection of more than 20,000 works of art, including an extensive anthology of 19th- and 20th-century American fine and decorative arts; major holdings of photography and folk and self-taught work, especially that of artists from the American South; burgeoning collections of modern and contemporary art, including paintings, sculpture, new media and design; a growing collection of African art, with work dating from prehistory through the present; and significant holdings of European paintings and works on paper. The High is dedicated to reflecting the diversity of its communities and offering a variety of exhibitions and educational programs that engage visitors with the world of art, the lives of artists and the creative process. For more information, visit the High's website.

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