

MADISON SQUARE PARK CONSERVANCY

ARTIST HUGH HAYDEN PROBES INHERENT TENSIONS IN AMERICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM AND THE AMERICAN DREAM IN HIS MOST AMBITIOUS PUBLIC ARTWORK

On view January through May 2022, *Brier Patch* Features a Tangled Network of
100 Interconnected School Desks Presented Across Four Lawns at
Madison Square Park



Installation view of Hugh Hayden's *Brier Patch* in Madison Square Park, New York, 2021/2022.
Photo by Yasunori Matsui.

New York, NY | Updated March 1, 2022—Artist Hugh Hayden realizes his most ambitious installation to date with a new public art commission at Madison Square Park. Presented across four separate lawns in the park, *Brier Patch* features a total of one-hundred wooden elementary school-style desks that erupt with tree branches, cohering into tangled assemblies with complex and layered meanings. The accumulations of desks summon the grid arrangement of classroom seating. Referencing folklore traditions around the world, the work calls on the notion of the brier patch as a place protective for some and dangerous for others, drawing connections to similar disparities within the education system and the ideal of the American Dream. Now on view through May 1, 2022, *Brier Patch* is complemented by a suite of public programs centered on storytelling and education.

"In Hugh Hayden's project, the overgrown configuration of branches overwhelms and encumbers the placidity of seats of childhood learning. Hayden imbues each of his works with intense meaning that, when peeled back, reveals lived experiences about rooted systems in

our country and the world. He transforms everyday objects into new forms that expose the properties and purpose of the original source," said Brooke Kamin Rapaport, Deputy Director and Martin Friedman Chief Curator of Madison Square Park Conservancy. "*Brier Patch* is both visually powerful and loaded with inherent tensions—growth and stagnation, seduction and peril, individual and community—that ask us to consider how these dichotomies coexist in engrained systems and the work on view."

For *Brier Patch*, the Conservancy's 42nd commissioned exhibition, Hayden fabricated tablet arm desks that sprout a tangled mass of tree branches, which are presented across four different lawns in the park. The largest group of 48 desks, arranged in a grid pattern, are sited on the Oval Lawn; another smaller grid is situated on Sparrow Lawn across from the playground in the northeast corner of the park. Two desks intermingle on Elm Lawn. An additional group on the Veteran's Lawn are presented without branches, enabling visitors to sit at the desks.

With its grid of repeated desk forms, *Brier Patch* alludes to the typical classroom organizational structure of row upon row of desks or even the regimented arrangement of tombstones in a military cemetery. In Hayden's installation, each desk, like a tombstone, can be seen as a stand-in for an individual. The chaotic branch structures disrupt the intended placidity of the formation, uniting individual elements to form one interconnected community. The project simultaneously signifies intellectual development and stasis—dual outcomes of an education system where some excel and others are left behind. For Hayden, the symbolism also extends to the financial entanglement of student loan debt incurred in the pursuit of higher education.

These and other interpretations are echoed within the concept of a brier patch for which the project takes its name, an environment that is difficult to inhabit, where only a few can truly thrive. In deploying this reference, Hayden also draws upon brier patch tales found in folklore traditions around the world, including Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus* stories, now widely condemned for their apocryphal depictions of idyllic Southern plantation life.

Added the Conservancy's Executive Director Keats Myer, "The Conservancy's public art program not only provides encounters with inspiring and challenging works of art to the 60,000 visitors who pass through Madison Square Park daily, but also gives artists the opportunity to experiment with their practices. We are proud to collaborate with Hugh Hayden on this project and to present him with the canvas of our park, where he will be able to express his vision on a new scale."

Brier Patch is organized by Brooke Kamin Rapaport, Deputy Director and Martin Friedman Chief Curator; Tom Reidy, Deputy Director, Finance and Special Projects; and Truth Murray-Cole, Curatorial Manager. Keats Myer is the Conservancy's Executive Director.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Hugh Hayden is a visual artist and sculptor whose practice considers the anthropomorphization of the natural world as a visceral lens for exploring the human condition. Raised in Texas and trained as an architect, his work often explores commonplace objects and their inherent symbolism in individual and collective lives. Hayden utilizes wood as his primary medium, frequently loaded with multi-layered histories in their origin, including objects as varied as discarded tree trunks, Christmas trees, cooking pans, or souvenir African sculptures. He saws, weaves, sculpts, and sands the material, creating works that reflect inherent cultural histories. Crafting metaphors for human existence and past experience,

Hayden's work questions the stasis of social dynamics and asks the viewer to examine their place within an ever-shifting ecosystem.

Hayden has had solo exhibitions at The Princeton University Art Museum in New Jersey in 2020 and at White Columns in New York in 2018. His work has been included in numerous group exhibitions including SculptureCenter, New York (2021); Hayward Gallery, London (2020); The Shed, New York (2019); Pilot Projects, Philadelphia (2018); Sundance Film Festival, Park City, UT (2015); MoMA PS1, New York, (2014); and Socrates Sculpture Park, New York, (2014). He is the recipient of residencies at Glenfiddich in Dufftown, Scotland (2014); Abrons Art Center and Socrates Sculpture Park (both 2012); and Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (2011). His solo exhibition, *Boogey Men*, is on view through April 2022 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami. He has also conceived a group exhibition with Public Art Fund, titled *Black Atlantic*, opening in May 2022 at Brooklyn Bridge Park, that will feature new commissions by five artists, including Hayden.

Hayden was born in Dallas, Texas in 1983 and lives and works in New York City. He holds a Bachelor of Architecture from Cornell University and an MFA from Columbia University. In 2020, Hayden, Lisson Gallery and CLEARING established the Solomon B. Hayden Fellowship in memory of Hayden's father at the Columbia University School of the Arts to support diverse voices in art.

EXHIBITION SUPPORT

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Madison Square Park Conservancy is a public/private partnership with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation.

ABOUT MADISON SQUARE PARK CONSERVANCY

Madison Square Park Conservancy cultivates and enlivens Madison Square Park, a dynamic seven-acre public park in New York City's Flatiron District and one of the city's most treasured greenspaces. Through its public art commissions, horticultural stewardship, and engaging programming, the nonprofit creates an urban oasis that welcomes a diverse community of over 60,000 visitors each day. Keats Myer is the Conservancy's Executive Director.

Since 2004, the Conservancy has become a leader in commissioning new works of public art, curating and presenting over 40 major site-specific installations and solo exhibitions through

its art programming. Led by Brooke Kamin Rapaport, Deputy Director and Martin Friedman Chief Curator, the program invites leading artists to push the boundaries of their practice and create risk-taking new works that experiment with materiality, scale, and theme in response to the park's unique environment. The ambition of the commissioning program expands each year alongside the diverse range of innovative artists including Diana Al-Hadid, Tony Cragg, Abigail DeVille, Leonardo Drew, Maya Lin, Iván Navarro, Martin Puryear, Arlene Shechet, Ursula von Rydingsvard, and Krzysztof Wodiczko.

In 2019, the Conservancy served as the commissioning institution for the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, marking the first time that an organization whose visual art program focuses exclusively on public art has received this honor. With Rapaport serving as Commissioner, the Conservancy presented new work by Martin Puryear.

For more information, contact

Resnicow and Associates

Juliet Sorce, 212.671.5158 or jsorce@resnicow.com

Delaney Smith, 212.671.5160 or dsmith@resnicow.com