

THE QUALITY INHERENT

BROADCASTING THE MODERN ADVENTURE:
PROGRESS VS. CULTURAL INERTIA

Using Art and Community to Signify Global Connectivity

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0 COMMENTS



A light breeze bites through an abnormally hot April day in a neighborhood just a few blocks from the bustling city life of Chevy Chase, Maryland. The front lawn of a two-story colonial nurtures tall, gently waving green grass and, hiding beneath a water laden sculpture, the blossoming fertility of flowers; the living, breathing artwork gives off a whimsical affect, something not normally found so close to the Nation's Capital. The sun shines down, reflecting rays of light from another piece of artistic wonder, casting reflections across the southern style home of Mr. Barton Rubenstein, artist and founder of The Mother Earth Project.

"The story begins right here," he states as he gestures towards a miniature model of a sculpture titled *Skybound*; the full-scale piece, 30 feet tall, is located in Pyramid Hill Sculpture Park, Hamilton, Ohio. His office is cozy with small-scale models of work covering shelves, tables, and every corner of the space. To the left is a desk and computer but the real decor, the real story, canvases the walls; all around the neutrally painted studio, pictures are pinned and hung closely together depicting a life rich in family and travel.





The **Mother Earth Project** is described as a "Global Environment-Saving Initiative Celebrating Sustainability." It is an artistic amalgamation: both a celebration of the everyday tasks we perform, such as recycling and saving energy, but also the advancement of collective awareness throughout the world. "To be eligible for receiving Mother Earth, countries must submit their environment-saving actions and timelines to the United Nations." Once this is complete, as a symbol of their dedication, one of Rubenstein's 5-meter high Mother Earth sculptures will be placed in their city "as a Symbol of Sustainability."

But the project, which began in 2015, was never the hidden hobby of Rubenstein, nor did the idea for the sculpture precipitate in a singular moment of realization; it slowly developed over time with the support of the community and his family.

"I had a curator friend come to the studio" to see the full production piece of **Skybound** prior to its relocation in 2012. "She's a curator for the National Portrait Gallery" and on the way out, "she fell in love" with a small sculpture. Unlike the majority of Rubenstein's Modern Art pieces, this small sculpture held mirrored stainless steel in the likeness of a human face, especially "in the negative space."

“ Since then, the National Portrait Gallery - which is one of the Smithsonian Museums - and myself had this mutualistic relationship with the goal of placing this large sculpture in front of the museum. In the 11th hour, the director decided to change tact and asked me to create a small scale of the same sculpture.



Rubenstein gestures to the back of the room where a small sculpture hides behind cardboard models. Its base is sleek; its silver face holds an enlivened texture undeveloped in the studio's surrounding drafts. "This is now called the Portrait of a Nation Prize at the Smithsonian. It's being given out to great Americans every other year."

The inaugural 2015 American Portrait Gala honored Americans such as baseball legend Hank Aaron, singer Aretha Franklin, artist and architect Maya Lin, Corporal Kyle Carpenter, and fashion designer Carolina Herrera. The next ceremony for those awarded with the prize will be held in November of 2017.

"[The Smithsonian] granted me the rights to use the large-scale sculpture in any capacity that I wanted to. My son, Ari, who is fourteen, said that, 'You should put this sculpture in different continents around the world.'"

"It was a very lofty thought; I do 95% of my commissions in this country – I've done maybe 80 or 90 public art projects around the US - and only a few internationally." Rubenstein estimates that his family has had over a hundred different conversations developing the project. "It's been an amazing process. Each time something inspirational comes out of a conversation, it makes our project tighter and tighter in its messaging."

“ I have now become an activist; I'm an environmental activist in addition to being a scientist and a public artist. That's a new thing for me.

He leans back in his office chair, his face telling of a memory he is replaying in his mind. He takes a moment to backtrack a bit and give a personal note to the project: "The actual sculpture is a profile of my mother."

"When the director brought me down to talk about this, she wanted me to find an image to celebrate a female because there are so many white old men that are already celebrated at the portrait gallery... because of our history." He leans forward in his chair, speaking with emotion and thought:

“ “Out on the street, in front of the museum, I had this epiphany: The mothers and grandmothers of our country are the unsung heroes that are not celebrated and that I would use my belated mother's image as a symbol of that idea. They loved it. That's the emotional piece.”

You can see the image of Rubenstein's mother dance across his eyes as he described a moment with a close friend, when she too had the realization that the profile of one of those unsung heroes now sat, fixed in metal, as a symbol of our Mother Earth.

“ I designed this sculpture, not as a byproduct of ideas in the intellectual sense; I have a visual experience, a visual cue – from canoeing in the wilderness lakes of Maine or watching eddy motions of water; nature inspires me. It's a very visceral connection; it's not an intellectual expression.

He lifts his arm and points to a table at the back of the office where an S-shaped miniature sculpture glistens from the window's spring sunlight. "I call it *Harmonize* because I just sort of see this harmony that's created between three parts. But I never thought of the word harmonize before I made it. I tell you that because the way I describe the Mother Earth Sculpture is that it comes – man comes – from, and out of, the earth."

“ There’s a ribbon of energy that comes out and it forms the image of a man in the negative space. I chose a stainless-steel material because it implies neither race nor nationality – it’s not black or white or yellow – and it has an energy; it has a light energy, which we all have. Also, all of the sculptures are designed to face downriver, so that they connect in the collective oceans. It becomes a collective experience.

Rubenstein describes the sculpture's ability to empower the need for personal discovery:

“ I don’t like to make things literal. I like there to be discovery because that’s a really important part of the human condition. Many people who I have met at the Georgetown statue don’t initially see the face inside; they only see the face on the outside edge. They look at the sculpture as opposed to the empty space. When they discover that, it’s a real, powerful moment for them and it’s a very connecting moment. They have a very autobiographical experience with the piece; it connects them.

When looking at that one symbol, Mother Earth, a global community not bound by borders and regimes or fixated on skin color or religion, realizes the effect that projects like Rubenstein's can have on the entire world, collectively. That connection between countries is vital to the message that Rubenstein is putting forward and he plans on moving this project to as many locations as he can.

“ There are plans to place it in five other countries this year and there are another thirty countries that are interested in [adding additions]. There could be dozens and dozens of this piece [fabricated]. Occasionally I’ll do an addition of three or five, but eighty to ninety percent of my work is one of a kind.

Rubenstein describes the process of choosing where to place the project as “a completely haphazard decision making process.” But that hasn’t stopped numerous countries from showing interest.

“ Right now, Israel, Cameroon...Germany seems like it's pretty much a go, Italy seems like it's a go, and I'm waiting to hear from New Zealand. I just met someone yesterday down at the sculpture who is a professor at George Washington who is Greek; he just left this morning for Athens and he knows people in the mayor's office and he wants to pitch it for me.

It seems that as soon as people come to the realization that this sculpture is more than a beautiful piece of artwork, they immediately immerse themselves in assisting to push the project further. People from all walks of life have offered their support, including a doctor from Cameroon, who Rubenstein met through his son's school. He quotes her as realizing, “half of my patients are sick because of the environment.”

“ When I told her the story about the Mother Earth Project she said that ‘I want to be a part of this project’ and she has basically spearheaded the whole connection to a lot of African nations that she has connections with. This is a project that is bigger than us, and people want to help.

Living in DC, as Rubenstein explains, definitely has its perks when working on a project as heavy and impactful as The Mother Earth Project. “You walk by somebody important every day. It's a great opportunity to connect with the world.”

“ People have really been responding to the Mother Earth Project; when I tell them about the collective oceans and the symbolic connection of the world, it's a powerful moment. I'm really charged up about it. One of the main things that we are trying to teach through this initiative is that this is the world's project and we are all now citizens of the planet. That's a very powerful thought. It's something that Albert Einstein said many years ago. At the time, it was a crazy idea, yet it was visionary, too. Now? It's real. Hopefully that's what this art will do. Hopefully it will teach people to be citizens of the planet.

But living in the Nation's Capital has only gotten him so far, as Rubenstein himself comes from the field of science, not political theater. Much of the forward momentum of this project has come from his own organic and grassroots approach.

“ I’ve been visiting and calling numerous embassies – Canada, Peru, Ecuador, I’m very close to placing a piece in Dublin – but what’s so amazing is almost every single embassy has a climate official there, somebody who that is their job. Almost everybody has an environment official, which is very telling. My success rate with engaging people is something like 99%; occasionally we’ll get somebody who just isn’t ready to talk, but if I did this project thirty years ago, I’d fall flat on my face.

On Cultural Identity

With the current state of our world, from extreme drought to wars that are intensified by climate related events, it is more imperative now than ever to bring us together in a collective stance. As Americans, we sit in our homes, shrouded by our green lawns, swimming pools, and television shows from the reality of what anthropogenic climate change is doing to the world around us. TQI asked Rubenstein to voice his thoughts on the awareness of climate change in other countries.

“ Every country has issues. Some are war-torn, like Kuwait, some have nuclear fallout from Russian nuclear tests in neighboring countries, but there is so much good being done. I find it very encouraging. In general, I think everyone else is much more on board than in this country. We live like a little Pacific island nation in our mentality. We have such a self-focus. We all grew up thinking that America is the best at doing everything, but I lived abroad – I lived in the Middle East for many years – and noticed how they did things differently.

His realization was that, although things as simple as traffic patterns were different, “they’re working fine there, too.”

“ That’s why I like our [Hall of Achievements page](#). People can go there and see their country and they can see what other countries are doing. Then they can realize, ‘Hey we should be doing this, too.’ The hope is, that will start a conversation with their community and, in six months, they can be doing it.

Though our current federal government is riddled with climate deniers, the Department of Defense is not turning a blind eye to the issues. However, their plans to withstand climate change are more geared towards military operations, than actual prevention. Even after their 2015 report titled, [National Security Implications of Climate-Related Risks and a Changing Climate](#), where they state that the, “DOD recognizes the reality of climate change and the significant risk it poses to U.S. interests globally,” the Trump administration and many congressmen continue to deny any relevance of such serious issues.

The constant mixed message that our government is collectively presenting regarding global climate change is saturated with self-preservation and economic undertones. In discussion with Rubenstein we pose the question of how one would convince a denier that climate change is real and worth acknowledging: He sits thoughtfully, mulling the question over before answering.

“ I don’t know the answer to that question.

Rubenstein continues with a story about a close relative in the building industry who holds self-interest driven complaints regarding permits and waiting periods. The relative had once stated to Rubenstein that, “I wish they could cut back some of these environmental regulations,” a statement reminiscent of Big Oil and other fossil fuel industries. Barton continues, an almost dispiriting look covering his face:

“ It’s a very self-focused view of the environment and I would say that most deniers have that on their mind. The world is so far away, even though they are standing on it.

Rubenstein shifts focus towards the types of media in today’s world of technological over-abundance; he references *Super Size Me* as a poignant example of reaching the masses with a vital message. He feels that conversations aiming to convince – person to person over a table – “is a lot of energy put out for one person and the chance of success is still slight, even when we’re close to them.”

“ I think that film is the most potent form [of persuasion] because it’s something you can look at on your own and not feel like people are judging you.

When it comes to corporations versus individuals, Rubenstein’s unwavering positive outlook resurfaces and he focuses more on what is being done, than what remains untouched. “I think corporations are well under way. Walmart just started the [Gigaton Project](#). They’re the largest company in the world and they’re looking at their entire supply chain. Their hope is to reduce their emissions by one gigaton over 15 years. It’s the equivalent of removing 211 million cars off the road.”

Even with the government’s fixation on preventing investment into renewable energy and putting power back in the hands of the fossil fuel industry, Rubenstein believes these companies may be more proactive than predominating impressions.

“ Whether or not the federal government is involved, there is actually a lot of momentum happening at the corporate level already. Local governments have formed coalitions and they’re working together. I find that very uplifting. Coal is now literally more expensive than renewables.

Citizens United v. FEC (2010) legalized the financial endorsement of political candidates by corporations through super PACs. This allows energy companies to be regarded as legal persons, and thereby have the ability to contribute directly to the campaign funds of those meant to represent the people of the United States. Rubenstein discussed the relation of this to the founding ideals of representation, taxation, federalism, and liberty:

“ I think it’s very simple. I think campaign finance reform is probably the biggest problem in our government – both local and federal – because the power of our vote is in jeopardy. The rich are controlling the government. The odd thing about it is people are wielding power at their own expense. It’s a very simple correlation. We’re all so mystified with the power of all these billionaires.

This obsession and mystification of the power of the richest among us seems to seep through the cracks, infecting even some of the largest organizations in the United States, including NASA. Since Trump’s inauguration he has feverishly attacked our government’s budget, slashing investments into agencies that spearhead vital climate research. Recently, even though Trump praised NASA for its “missions of exploration and discovery,” he refused to acknowledge the work they do for our home planet’s safety and survival. Budget cuts aimed at NASA scarcely mentioned any specifics on their space programs but focused on cutting four climate-related NASA satellite missions. These missions are significant and necessary projects that are in place to help scientists understand more about our climate system and how global climate change is affecting the earth. They also aim to help combat coastal water degradation and drought stress on our food sources.

Not only as an artist and environmental activist, but also as a member of the scientific community, TQI asked Rubenstein how he felt about the balance between studying our own planet’s life support systems versus exploration beyond our little blue dot. At the mention of science and space exploration, Rubenstein’s demeanor changed; his dedication to the world of science was written in the grin upon his face.

“ I’m a scientist and I was a physics and astronomy major, so this is right up my alley. To be honest, science and math are my first loves. I think the contribution that NASA has given to our technological world is much larger than people can appreciate. We just don’t realize it. So much of technology is just a spin-off of what has happened at NASA and in the armed services. It’s been invaluable. I think NASA needs to continue exploring. We learn so much about ourselves by studying other planets.

The government's relationship with NASA has oscillated throughout its history depending on the priorities of the party controlling the budgetary funding of the organization. Much of the emphasis, in the media and public perception, puts the blame of the new administration's lack luster approach to global climate issues on the party they represent. However, through the decades we have seen a drastic shift in the Republican/Democrat paradigm. Climate change activists can be seen regularly representing the idea that this is a bi-partisan issue. We asked Rubenstein how he felt about the political finger pointing and whether the Democratic Party platform's stance on environmental priorities was appropriately proportional to the threat of climate change.

“ Every platform is somehow trying to connect with a certain segment of the population. In Germany right now, they're doing all sorts of energy taxes. They're really pushing to make their carbon footprint zero, so they're far, far ahead of us. Everything's incremental. If you take our democratic system and you put it in Germany, it would be a fraction of the types of things that they are considering. Everything has to be incremental, but unfortunately, it's not going fast enough [here]. The rest of the world is out in front. We're the number two polluter in the world behind China and we've already gotten to the point where we're not going to be able to stop climate change and there's going to be a lot of damage. People just don't realize. So, it isn't enough. We have a lot of convincing to do.

With the extreme imposition of governmental rhetoric aimed at other, seemingly less vital issues, the public's perception of climate change has, up to this point, been disregarded as a viable priority. The media's use of abrupt buzz words such as terrorism, Sharia, and xenophobia, coupled with their lack of coverage on acute issues such as the DAPL protests, prevents any notion of shock or surprise that the citizens of this country would be more inclined to push Climate Change to the background. In recent days, however, with attention to the threat of leases pending on public lands, more and more have joined the protest in defiance. Rubenstein comments on the propensity for compartmentalizing the concept of nature and the environment by stating:

“ It’s a very interesting thing; two things come to mind. First of all, with my Jewish background, I’ve been interested in monotheism and the Old Testament which says, ‘Man should use the land and the animals for his needs, but do it in a respectful way.’ It sounds pretty good; if you think about it, Judeo-Christian thought has a lot to do with who we are today. In our initiative, we celebrate sustainability; that’s our main thing. We want to take a positive tact. We also reach out to a lot of schools. There is a Hawaiian school we’ve collaborated with and there’s a teacher there who says that ‘sustainability isn’t really a good word’ because the Polynesian culture is about a symbiotic relationship. That’s how the Hawaiian people think. It’s not like, ‘We’re the rulers over the world and we’re going to use it. We’re going to be respectful here, but we are in control.’ They don’t look at it that way. They feel like they are just one in this greater ethos of life and interconnection. It’s very powerful. It made me think twice about whether or not I want to change the name of this project, but I think sustainability is a very good stepping stone so we decided to keep it. It does make you think twice about this Judeo-Christian thought that is part of the fabric in the way we think. ‘We need to use this land for our needs.’

Ryan Zinke, the current Secretary of the Interior, has jumped at the chance to turn land use into a profitable business for the United States Government. Following President Trump’s executive order to gut the Clean Power Plan, Zinke also announced two departmental orders: The first would overturn a 2016 moratorium by President Obama on new coal leases until new environmental impact statements could be completed. The second order starts a review of past Interior agency actions to balance climate-change policies with job creation, especially regarding oil and natural gas development. At the same time, Zinke chartered a new Royalty Policy Committee that looked at the revenue and rent coming to the federal government from energy developers. “All of us as taxpayers and citizens have a stake to make sure we get value from our resources,” Zinke stated. “The ultimate goal is to make sure the royalties are transparent in how we collect them, so industry can price them accordingly.”

Regarding the use of public lands, both commercially and personally, we asked Rubenstein whether he believed the lands and resources should be protected, exploited, or both. He wrinkled his nose slightly at the question and sat back in his chair, crossing his arms.

“ Definitely not exploited; I don’t like that word. I’ll tell you this; it was sort of a revelation for me. I have a good friend who is the CEO of World Wildlife Fund in D.C. and one of the things he has said is ‘The quickest progress you can make is to work with the Exxons and find a balance where they can continue to do what they’re doing but you create these large estuaries of protection. It has to be some symbiotic relationship with the enemy or whatever you want to call it.’ I think there has to be a balance, at least initially, to stop the acceleration away from any protection. Our population is growing. We need to protect our national parks. President Obama created a million and a half square mile marine park outside of Hawaii and I thought that was very appropriate. I think we need to protect our lands as quickly as possible before it’s ruined.

Global Consciousness: Nuclear Weapons and a Warming Climate

In December of last year, President Putin said Russia needs to “strengthen the military potential of strategic nuclear forces.” Trump responded within 24 hours that the United States “must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes” and “Let it be an arms race.” Since then, we have seen an onset of military strikes including the dropping of the Mother of All Bombs. The “MOAB,” though non-nuclear, is a bomb weighing in at nearly 21,000 pounds and creates a blast seen up to 20 miles away; on 13 April, one was dropped in Afghanistan on what was believed to be an ISIS cell. Rubenstein’s response to our current arms race and steady increase in military provocation was both positive in nature and mindful of violent trends from one generation to the next.

“ Well, I grew up going to a Quaker school – A Sidwell Friends school – and they believe in pacifism. One of the big banners on the front building, growing up, said ‘Making war will never make peace.’ People say, ‘This was the war to end all wars,’ but all war does is make more war. Only peace can make peace. That’s the simple answer to the question. We could talk for hours about it, but it gets reduced to that.

One of the biggest mantras indoctrinated into young Americans is an overly optimistic trust that the United States government will always pursue, procure, and produce what is best for its citizens. From the handling of nuclear weapons to the handling of our children’s education, no one ever seems to step forward and question the unwavering conviction we are expected to show. We have some of the most knowledgeable scientists and the most well trained military members handling our nuclear weapons but somehow huge mistakes are still made. In 1961, two armed nuclear bombs were accidentally dropped in North Carolina and, luckily, failed to detonate. TQI asked Rubenstein, with the current decisions happening regarding nuclear technology, how he would describe his level of trust in our government:

“ What we’ve done in our country is to separate the power so that no single person has all of the power. That was a very smart idea, allowing us to remove the fear of a dictatorship. That’s a good thing about our country. I think, obviously, that it is always being tested and people are trying to exert more power than each of the three branches of government is supposed to wield.

The Doomsday Clock represents the threat of global nuclear war and, since 2007, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has also taken the threat of climate change into consideration while determining our metaphorical proximity to an uninhabitable planet. The closest it has ever been set is two minutes to midnight in 1953. As of January 2017, the clock is set at two and a half minutes to midnight; the Bulletin states, “The probability of global catastrophe is very high, and the actions needed to reduce the risks of disaster must be taken very soon.” Rubenstein, however, believes that Trump’s election, and the decisions put forth by the administration, may just be a blessing in disguise.

“ I’m starting to get a very strong feeling from all of these different people I meet – like a steely resolve – that this administration has actually been a positive thing because it has enabled and empowered the citizens of our planet to act together. **The Science March** had over 600 other sister marches around the world; I mean how powerful is that? We’re acting, now, as a world. We’re not acting as nations. We’re acting as citizens, collective citizens. I think that is so powerful.

He went on to talk about social media’s dynamic effect on how people across the world are able to connect. Rubenstein noted the Arab Spring in Egypt as well as the troubling chaotic wars raging in Syria to show how services like Facebook and Twitter could be used to further divide communities. “But here we are now with these marches and all of this social media connecting people; it is just remarkable.”

“ I am very encouraged by it. I think Bernie Sanders gave a speech yesterday where he said, ‘Ok, we lost, but we’re moving on and we’re still doing great stuff.’ You know, Trump likes to bring attention to himself by sort of being back and forth, so I choose not to really talk about it. It’s not that it isn’t on my mind, but I’ve just found that there are so many more important things to be focused on right now. We’re still going to do our thing.

The Mother Earth Project has made a point to include all nations of this world as one nation facing the same threat: global climate change. However, it is vital to point out that already arid countries like Syria are impacted by climate change in different ways than the rest of the world. Severe damage to over 75% of Syrian crops and 80% of agricultural livestock played a major role in the displacement of over a million people, just prior to the violent uprisings within the country’s major cities. Rubenstein commented on the level of global consciousness relative to how local populations react to effects by saying:

“ People are aware. I would say that people are aware, especially with drought, with a heightened awareness. People are making adjustments and it’s not an intellectual conversation, it’s just ‘I don’t have any food for the table because there are no crops this year.’

The warm air of the office settled in the approaching evening breeze as we asked him one last question. Do you have any intentions of focusing on regions that are destabilized or specifically Islamic nations? As if he knew what we were going to ask before we asked it, he shook his head stating:

“ I’m focused on all of them. Our Instagram account, **Humans of Mother Earth**, is a tribute to that because we reach out to dozens and dozens of countries, featuring stories.

With the interview complete, Barton Rubenstein steps out of his studio and into the long shadows of late-afternoon. He rounds a corner and enters the simple workshop where his artwork is created. Rolling tables and ceiling-fed power cords offer ample space for sheet metal manipulation and swirling, sparking grinders. High above the workshop floor, a tattered star-spangled banner is pinned upon the wall, creating a feeling of an all-American artist tucked away in the Nation's Capital.

Following Rubenstein toward the house's front, he stops at several of his sculptures to tell the stories and ideas that were part of their creation. Once out front, Ari, his fourteen-year-old son, like his father, talks about the project with beaming pride. As Ari talks about his family, his interests, and The Mother Earth Project, you can see his father radiating from the inside out. Departing the artist's home and studio, strolling down the quieting suburban streets, words from Rubenstein's website ring true:



“ As an artist, I am moved by the possibility of making someone else's life more meaningful, less stressful, or simply bringing out a smile. When I create art, I imagine each of these positive changes beginning a chain reaction of other positive human interactions. The idea of this brings me great pleasure and satisfaction.



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