

Artist Mocked Park Ave With Giant Roses—But Nobody Got It, So He Went to Paris

By Margaret Carrigan • 03/29/18 2:00pm



Will Ryman with his installation at Parc de La Villette. Antoine Antoniol/Getty Images for Will Ryman

Will Ryman doesn't consider himself misunderstood—that would be a tad too dramatic for this down-to-earth artist. But his work has often been misconstrued as pithily Pop-like despite the fact that much of it often has a deeply philosophical underbelly. Case in point: his large-scale public sculptures that have intermittently taken over his hometown of New York City—like *The Roses* (2011), his iconic oversized thorny flowers lining 10 blocks of Park Avenue in New York City, and *Bird* (2013), a 12-foot raven crafted out of giant steel nails in Flatiron Plaza. Ryman intended the Park Avenue commission to critique the excess of the surroundings in which the giant flowers were installed—something that was lost on many viewers.

But with this clear penchant for subtext and flair for drama, it makes sense that the artist started his career as a playwright before returning to the visual arts—a family business, one could say, since his dad was the legendary minimalist painter Robert Ryman, and his mother and brothers all identify as artists.

For his latest exhibition, however, Ryman revives his interest in theater to create an expansive site-specific installation at Paris' Parc de La Villette as part of the third edition of the 100 Percent Festival, the city's celebrated interdisciplinary arts festival. And Paris seems to be embracing his sense of humor.



Will Ryman's installation at Parc de La Villette. Antoine Antoniol/Getty Images for Will Ryman

Comprised of three works—a conglomerate of oversized clay-formed face shapes looking skyward, a giant bronze boulder called *Sisyphus*, and a brightly colored Stonehengian labyrinth inspired by Pac-Man—the installation draws on the tradition of the Theater of the Absurd, interrogating how we derive meaning in life. On view through September 16, the commission is Ryman's first major presentation in Europe.

Prior to the exhibition's opening on March 22, Ryman spoke with Observer about being a misunderstood playwright, his interest in absurdism, and finding meaning in everyday experiences.

You started your career in theater. Why did you switch to sculpture?

I was a playwright for 12 years. The plays that I wrote were about the unconscious, about what happens in your mind before the idea comes. So they didn't always make a lot of sense—they were all made-up words and lines.

My interest was in French absurdist philosophy and the work of writers like Albert Camus. I was really influenced by other dramatists like Samuel Beckett and his famous play *Waiting for Godot*, in which, you know, nothing happens. It's just two guys waiting around for some sort of enlightening experience but it never comes.

Anyway, that's kind of what became of my theater career—nothing ever happened with it. No one really understood my plays. Every now and then one got produced but the actors always hated it because they were filled with nothing but nonsense! At that time, in New York, everyone was looking for the next *Reservoir Dogs*, something really dialogue-oriented and that was *not* what I was doing. My dialogue was all gibberish. So I switched to sculpture—something a little more tangible. This show in Paris is basically me reviving that interest in absurdism in sculptural form since I never fully realized it on stage.



Will Ryman's installation at Parc de La Villette. Antoine Antoniol/Getty Images for Will Ryman

Your *Roses* series of sculptures, which really put you in the spotlight several years ago, were a bit absurd, weren't they? If only because of their giant size and Park Avenue placement.

I don't know if I really achieved what I wanted to with *The Roses*. Don't get me wrong, I was proud of them, but I think something was lost in translation there.

I was interested in the meeting of commercial symbols and the meaning of culture. Park Avenue is a cultural symbol in and of itself; it represents this ideal of an elite, sophisticated lifestyle that so few people can access. And obviously roses are loaded with symbolic meaning—they're the commercial symbol of love, romance, seduction. So I wanted to exploit both of these things by making absurd, cartoonish rose sculptures that were too big to be taken seriously.

And then plonking them down on Park Avenue would offer some sort of critique of these ideals of luxury, of meaning through consumerism, that we're constantly being sold. But I think a lot of people just saw pretty roses on a fancy street. Which is fine, that's valid. I just wanted to push the envelope a bit more, but that's hard to do when you're making a work of public art.



A New Yorker walks past one of Will Ryman's "The Roses", a site-specific installation on New York City's Park Avenue January 24, 2011. The installation of 38 larger than life sculptures of colossal rose blossoms towering as high as 25 feet alongside 20 individual rose petal sculptures are featured between 57th and 67th Streets.
TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP/Getty Images

Your installations at Parc de La Villette are public works, though. Do you think they better express what you were trying to get at in *The Roses*? Because, again, you're using absurdism as a form of cultural critique.

Maybe. I don't think absurdism as a philosophy is critical, per se. It's just honest and we often don't want honesty. Our culture revolves around this idea that satisfaction awaits us in all these things that are outside of ourselves. We look for meaning in all these things you can buy or otherwise consume. That's what my Pac-Man inspired maze is about at La Villette.

The whole premise of the game is just that little yellow dude going around and around eating as much as he can until he inevitably gets killed. So I'm putting visitors in Pac-Man's position, but there's no food in the maze—don't expect anything to eat while you're there. But that's kind of the point. When you're really searching for meaning, you expect some sort of enlightened experience, but it's already in you. It's already there, in your everyday existence. So the outward search is kind of meaningless.

But to me that lack of meaning is beautiful—it means our very existence in any form is perfect even in the imperfection. That's what I like about being a sculptor and working with really simple materials like clay. It just is what it is. Working with it is all about appreciating its materiality, which is so basic—just water and dirt. But you can make whatever you want out of it.