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The 2017 Nasher Prize Winner Is French Artist Pierre Huyghe

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By Jerome Weeks



This year's winner of the \$100,000 Nasher Sculpture Prize is a boundary-breaking artist. Pierre Huyghe's artworks can be mysterious, goofy and beautiful. He's planted trees inside the Sydney Opera House and sank a sculpture in the Mediterranean so only divers can see it. KERA's Jerome Weeks reports last night's announcement of the French artist as the Nasher winner helps define the prize – by not limiting sculpture.

The Rachofsky Warehouse is a private exhibition space a few blocks from the Galleria. It's where some of the vast art

collection of Cindy and Howard Rachofsky is kept. It's also where last night's announcement of the Nasher Prize was held. Unbeknownst to the well-heeled people waiting to hear who the winner was, they'd walked past one of Pierre Huyghe's artworks near the warehouse entrance.

It's a big chunk of darkened concrete. Huyghe cast it from a broken, old stone monument outside Paris – it's just a headless, naked figure sprawled on the ground.

"But then," says Jeremy Strick, director of the Nasher Sculpture Center, "he inserted electrical coils, which heat up, so if you put your hand on the figure it may be warm, like a person. It's really uncanny. And there's water, and moss grows from it. So it's very much this living system."



Strick says this is typical of Huyghe's complex artistry. In a single work, he evokes the grand history of statues, but also, ultimately, their fallen state. He includes electricity yet allows nature to take its course, letting moss grow in the cracks and crevices.

Yet this work – titled "*La deraison*" – or 'Unreason' – is almost conventional by the French artist's normally unorthodox standards.

'La deraison' by Pierre Huyghe. Photo: Jerome Weeks

“Huyghe, who certainly makes objects that anyone would call sculpture,” says Strick, “also makes films, videos, computer animations, a range of things that often can address very serious themes but also can have a humorous quality that’s really delightful.”

The 54-year-old artist has created a small-town parade in a community along the Hudson River. He’s built aquariums, ice storms and a puppet theater. He postulated an expedition to the Antarctic — ending with a skating rink of black ice. Huyghe lives and works in Chile. And although he has artworks in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim and the Modern Art Museum in New York, he’s probably better known in Europe than in America.



‘Black Ice’ by Pierre Huyghe

Catherine Craft, associate curator at the Nasher, cites one of Huyghe’s most famous works called ‘Untilled.’ It was set up in a park in Germany. At its center is another classic reclining nude statue – only this one has a living beehive for a head.

“It’s this incredibly arresting image,” Craft says, “so you can talk about it in terms of having ecological effects but at a certain level, it’s just dreamlike.”

Simply put, Huyghe is a wildly inventive conceptual artist more than your typical stone

carver. Huyghe actually makes the first Nasher winner – Colombian artist Doris Salcedo – seem almost conservative. Yet her artworks included clothing, rose petals and giant cracks in floors. Last year’s choice of Salcedo indicated the Nasher was going to be an international prize, picked by a nine-member jury of some of the most influential curators and museum directors around. And the prize would not necessarily be tied to traditional forms, objects or materials.



‘Untilled’ by Pierre Huyghe

“Huyghe sets an example of the jury’s thinking,” Strick says. “They want to use the prize as a way of testing or expanding our notions of sculpture. I think in the first year, the jury really set a position for the prize. The second year, they begin to determine its direction.”

A central illusion of the sculptor’s art has been making bronze or marble look like human flesh. And therein lies another illusion: Flesh will die, but the statue will last. But of course bronze and marble crumble, too. In

this light, Huyghe is almost the *anti*-sculptor. He doesn’t aim to create objects that even give the illusion of lasting. He’s made a boat of ice, has moss growing on one statue, a beehive on another.

Everything grows or decays.

Grows *and* decays.