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## CLIFF GARTEN’S MODERN MEMORIAL TO MLK

SIMONE SUTNICK



I AM A MAN PLAZA PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
CLIFF GARTEN.

The city of Memphis, Tennessee recently unveiled a public work by artist Cliff Garten to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the historic 1968 Sanitation Workers Strike and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Comprised of a 12-foot sculpture, a timeline and a dedicatory wall bearing the names of 1,300 sanitation workers, *I AM A MAN* Plaza celebrates the late icon while also calling out the ongoing fight against racial discrimination in America. *Cultured* sat down with the artist to talk about about the research behind the project, the power of community and harnessing history for future gains.



**How did this project come about?** The project was a national competition sponsored by the city of Memphis and UrbanArt Commission. As part of the 2018 MLK 50 Celebration in Memphis, TN, the city decided to create a public place to honor the Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968. This strike was of course the reason that Dr. King had come to Memphis in support of the sanitation workers. He addressed the strikers and the community in one of his greatest speeches—in which he foretells his death—“I’ve Been to the Mountain Top”, the night before he was assassinated. The families of the sanitation workers and the community in Memphis had long been wanting to honor the strikers, some of whom are still living, and the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s death was the opportunity to do this.

Clayborn Temple was the seat of the strike and where workers assembled to march to City Hall. The *I AM A MAN* Plaza is adjacent to the Temple, which is being restored and is on the Historic Places Register. I was very interested in rejoining the Temple to the Civil Rights History described and inscribed in the Plaza, making it a place of national interest and a pride of Memphis

**What does it mean for you personally to be part of this commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968?** I think it is really about what it means for Memphis and for America. At a time when hierarchical Confederate monuments are being removed throughout the South, this piece is a criticism of a monumentality where we are positioned below the “hero.” *I AM A MAN* Plaza is a necessary new model for making public memorials and monuments. We need to be celebrating a different aspect of American democratic life. This is what the Civil Rights Movement and this strike in particular represented: the right of sharing in the political and economic will of those with power and privilege.

The continued incarceration and unjustified shooting of black men in America is the legacy of the slavery and the racism that still is America, 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement and the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. No one can truly understand this unless you live a black life. Working on this project in Memphis allowed me to deepen my understanding of our national racism and that understanding is part of what is offered in *I AM A MAN* Plaza. On my part, it is a deeply felt response to the opportunity they gave me. The Plaza belongs first to Memphis and then to America.



THE ENTRANCE TO / AM A MAN PLAZA.  
PHOTO BY LISA BUSER.

**What kind of experience does this work create for the viewer?** The sculpture and plaza are welcoming. This is very important from the physically felt position of the body. *I AM A MAN* is larger than us because the message concerning human dignity and freedom is larger than any one of us. However, we are encouraged to approach and touch the sculpture, to see our reflection in the surface overlaid with Dr. King’s words and to appreciate our own position in a culture still guided by the history of slavery. When you really get involved with *I AM A MAN* Plaza, it is a self-critical moment. That is what makes it powerful and that is what makes it an enduring moment in American history, when America again tries to come to grips with its racist legacies.

When I work in a specific place and I am addressing a significant social history such as the death of Dr. King and the Sanitation Worker’s Strike, I become a kind of medium for that social history. The iconic quality of the text “I AM A MAN” is of the historical moment of 1968. I had to be very aware of how to represent that historical moment and allow it to come through my work, re-contextualized for the 21st century. The sculpture comes from my connection to that history. My decision to re-present the text “I AM A MAN” as the sculpture itself had to be done carefully, simply and honestly. I was really channeling the sanitation workers and using my skill as a sculptor to bring their message back to the Memphis community and to America 50 years after MLK was assassinated. The scale of the piece, the materials of bronze and mirror polished stainless steel, the edge conditions, the text cut into the surface of the sculpture and the volume all play a role in getting the viewer involved with the sculpture at a personal level.

Though the commission was to create a sculpture, my proposal was to build a place, not only a singular object. My public work is comprised of places where sculptures determine space and



walk through to get to the sculpture. This is the context for the sculpture and it sets up an energy for the viewer. This is a formal arrangement, but not a hierarchical one.



FORMER SANITATION WORKER ELMORE NICKELBERRY. PHOTO BY LISA BUSER.

**How important was it for you to engage the community in the process of creating *I AM A MAN*?**  
Conversation with the community who will use the work is always an initial step. In the context of the weight of the history on this site in Memphis, I wanted a conversation to take place that allowed Memphis to take ownership of the work. When I started the project, I told the UrbanArt Commission I was not going to do this alone. If you want to understand the place, you have to understand the people who live there. I set the project up so that we could build a place that Memphis would love and that would have national significance in memorializing the Sanitation Workers Strike and the death of MLK. My team included a young local poet, Steve Fox, and I proposed that he would organize a series of public workshops with the UrbanArt Commission of Memphis. The idea was that the stories and material he gathered in these workshops, oral histories of the Strike and what people thought was important to provide, would create the bones of a poem that we would carve into the marble entry gates of *I AM A MAN* Plaza. The poem would be a community statement of where Memphis was 50 years after MLK's assassination and how



community leaders, scholars and citizens from Memphis. This poem or “community text,” as we referred to it, appears on one of the marble gates facing Clayborn Temple.

**How did you arrive at the idea of using different materials?** Sculpture comes from materials. If you want to engage someone completely in a place, you have to condition it with the right type of materials. Every material contains a certain physical vibration and every material affects our perception. In a work like this, which is a memorial, you have to hook the materials and forms to the feelings. I call a work like this “landscape sculpture” because the trees, paving, slopes, seating and lighting all condition the total response of the viewer to the place and to the sculptures which determine the space. In a discrete reference to racial disparity, I selected black granite and white marble and for the main sculpture, bronze and polished stainless steel. These materials paired together imply the historic separation of races, but their placement together is also a statement of the possibility of unity. These are two sides of the same coin in American public life. The text from the “I Have Been to the Mountaintop” speech is cut through the stainless steel and bronze of the sculpture. It is not the entire speech, but it is the palimpsest connecting Dr. King’s life and work to the justice that the sanitation workers were demanding. The two-foot-deep block letters, *I AM A MAN*, read back to back—one side bronze and one side mirror-polished stainless steel. The mirror is important because, as you read Dr. King’s words, you see your reflection in the “Mountain Top” speech. He asked us—and the sculpture is asking us—to examine our own racism. In this way, the entire *I AM A MAN* Plaza asks an uncompromising question: are we willing to confront ourselves, our inner pride and resentment, to alter the course of the racist underpinnings of American society? When you are engaged with the sculpture, even if you are subliminally engaged, you are engaged with yourself. So, material is an important part of the equation. Surrounding all of this is the idea that no one will want to be in a place that does not hold them and make them feel comfortable and safe about being in public and considering these tough issues. I also have brought about that feeling of comfort for people so that there is a chance for this engagement to take place. The art is not made to be shocking. It is more like I am saying, “I will draw you in here and then you can shock yourself into recognizing your racism if you are at all awake.”



I AM A MAN SCULPTURE IN FRONT OF CLAYBORN TEMPLE. PHOTO BY CLIFF GARTEN.

**There is an incredible amount of research and history present in the work, what was the process of developing the project?** During the public workshops and the writing and editing of the community text, there were continual demands on the sculpture to say everything about the strike and tell the entire story. Steve Fox started that research, but it took a whole committee to round it out and polish it. I had to keep changing the design to accommodate all of that history. If one thing changes, everything has to change. The other thing was we had to build the project in six months, half the time we would normally need. It was a very difficult project to do in that amount of time.

Representing history is a tricky thing in a memorial, especially when you are into a text-heavy piece like this. The relationship of the text to the space is something we got right. Throughout the project we struggled to select the right quotes and history. There are quotes from strike participants and Dr. King on the marble gates facing you as you enter, so you must walk between their words to get to the *I AM A MAN* sculpture. There is a black granite dedicatory wall etched with the names of 1300 employees of the 1968 Sanitation Department. There is an elliptical ring of black granite



each of the block letters. This sculpture is illuminated from within and glows like a large lantern at night, light emitting from the laser-cut letters.

When I work with text I have an understanding of how it needs to unfold on material and in space. This has to do with the average height of a person, the cadence of your walk and the distance things are from you when you read them. There is a specific kind of relationship between text, sculpture and the human body that I cultivate.



CLIFF GARTEN AND FORMER  
SANITATION WORKERS FROM THE 1968  
STRIKE. PHOTO BY LISA BUSER.

**What was it like to collaborate with people from different practices?** Collaboration is not a rarity in my practice, but a standard part of what my studio does. Matt Gilio-Tenan is an architect in my studio and we work together every day on all types of projects. Our studio manager, Bridget Carron, is an art historian who really cares about seeing art as a part of our daily life. We have engineers who regularly consult for us and I have particular people throughout the country who fabricate my work in different materials: metal, stone, glass, wood. Some of these fabricators have become like an extension of my studio. We specialize in the complex moves of integrating art into architecture.



the only way to accomplish my aims—one of which is to keep art in public and on the street where people are in contact with it, and where it is part of the “everyday,” not sequestered in a museum.

I worked with the community of Memphis, the city leadership, UrbanArts, Steve Fox, the project poet, JPA Inc., John Jackson, the landscape architect of record, All World Construction Management and Precise Contractors. Metal Arts Foundry made the *I AM A MAN* sculpture and Quarra Stone digitally carved the marble gates and fabricated the black granite columns, granite timeline and Dedicatory Wall. It was a team effort to execute my vision. John had the confidence of the City and without his work the project would not have happened in its full form. I am indebted to him because he believed in my work, our work. Also, Lauren Kennedy of UrbanArt worked tirelessly to make the community workshops and application of text a success and gave her total support to the realization of the sculpture.