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100+ Black Artists Will Take Over a Boulevard in South Los Angeles

Melvin Edwards, Maren Hassinger, and Alison Saar are among the artists kicking off the Destination Crenshaw initiative.



Maren Hassinger, "Tree Duet I, 5617 San Vicente Blvd, Los Angeles" (c. 1974/2021), silver gelatin print, 20 x 30 inches, edition of 5, 2 AP (Photo by Adam Avila; all images courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC)

LOS ANGELES – Destination Crenshaw moved one step closer to becoming a reality earlier this month, when the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Commission approved the installation of seven permanent sculptures along the project's 1.3 mile-long route. In addition to these seven artworks, Destination Crenshaw will include works by over 100 Black artists, making it "the largest commissioning initiative ever undertaken for Black artists" in the United States, according to a press statement.

Launched in 2017, the \$100 million initiative aims to redesign a stretch of Crenshaw Boulevard from Vernon to Slauson, a major hub of Los Angeles's African-American community in South Los Angeles. Spearheaded by Marqueece Harris-Dawson, LA City Councilmember for District 8, it includes a wide range of arts and community leaders among its advisors and stakeholders such as Naima Keith, the vice president of Education and Public Programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; gardener and activist Ron Finley; Jill Moniz, curator and founder of Transformative Arts; and, before his death in 2019, rapper Nipsey Hussle. It has received funding from the city and county, as well as the state of California, and it was recently announced that NBA star DeMar DeRozan would be leading a private fundraising drive. Groundbreaking took place on February 29, 2020, and the project is slated to be completed in fall 2022.

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Alongside this cultural component, the project will feature over 30,000 feet of sustainable landscape design, and it promises to directly invest in local businesses through its DC Thrive program, which "focuses on skill-building, technical assistance, operations support, and providing access to public and private capital." The construction project itself aims to economically boost the community, with a pledge to hire 70% of workers locally. The redesign is led by architecture firm Perkins&Will, which previously worked on the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC.

The artists chosen for these initial seven sculptures are Charles Dickson, Melvin Edwards, Maren Hassinger, Artis Lane, Alison Saar, Kehinde Wiley, and Brenna Youngblood, each of whom has lived or worked in South LA at some point during their lives.

Four of the artworks, by Dickson, Hassinger, Lane, and Wiley, will be installed at the northern end of Destination Crenshaw, in Sankofa Park, named for the symbolic Ghanian bird that flies toward the future while looking towards the past. LA native Dickson, who lives and works in Compton, will contribute "Car Culture," a trio of figures based on West African Senufo ceremonial objects topped by automotive parts. "An Object of Curiosity, Radiating Love" by Maren Hassinger is a large pink sphere that glows pink when approached. Hassinger grew up in Leimert Park, and began her career alongside fellow multidisciplinary African-American artists in LA like David Hammons and Senga Nengudi.

Both Artis Lane and Kehinde Wiley will reimagine traditional European statuary to reflect the neighborhood's Black history and community. Lane's "Emerging First Man" is a larger-than-life Black male figure cast in bronze, representing spiritual rebirth through adversity. Wiley, who grew up in South Central, will contribute an equestrian statue featuring a West African woman riding forward while glancing behind her, in the mode of the Sankofa bird. This can be considered something of a homecoming for Wiley, who was chosen for the Metro Young Artists program as a teen.