



Josiah McElheny talks about his new public art project in Madison Square Park

By: Paul Laster
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Celebrated for his amazing glass sculptures and installations, Josiah McElheny takes an expansive new direction with Prismatic Park, an outdoor art project for Madison Square Park in which glass structures serve as backdrops for performers of varying stripe, including poet Mónica de la Torre and musician Lea Bertucci. While installing the piece, the artist pauses to discuss the work, the performances involved and his thoughts on public art's relationship to civic life.

Let's start with the elements of the piece.

What do they consist of?

Four things, basically: three sculptures, which are something between architecture, sculpture and functional object, and the performances in and around them.

So are the performances as important as the sculptures themselves?

Absolutely. There are 15 performers or groups





using the park and the sculptures as a kind of platform or a backdrop for their work. This artwork couldn't exist without people, both as performers and audience members, which to me is the essence of something being out in public.

Why are performances so key to the project?

Essentially the piece asks the question of

whether or not art can increase a kind of democratic engagement of human beings within a city environment. The performances address the idea of having chance encounters with art, about dealing with something you didn't expect or even understand, yet you're having a dialogue with it anyway.

Did you choose the performers?

Not personally. I relied on three nonprofit organizations to make the selections because they had a better grasp of who might be challenged and excited by this particular opportunity. I don't think it's for every performer because unlike doing something in a scheduled setting, there's no way to know how the audience will react. I mean, 90 percent of people in the park are there to eat lunch or listen to the birds or get some sun, so it will be interesting to see what happens. Hopefully something positive.

Why use prismatic for the title?

First, the sculptures are made out of prismatic glass, but the title also suggests something that starts out as one thing before expanding into many other things, the way a prism takes white light and expands it into a spectrum of diverse colors.

Earlier you used the phrase, "democratic engagement." What did you mean?

These days, people are segregating themselves more and more into their own little groups. Art can serve as a way to push back against that sort of separation by reinforcing our shared democratic values. We need to forge a society out of difference, out of individuals with different perspectives. I think art can help us to do that.

Josiah McElheny's Prismatic Park is at Madison Square Park through Oct 8.

