



Installation view: The Roof Garden Commission: Alicja Kwade, ParaPivot, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019. Courtesy the artist; 303 Gallery, New York; KO?NIG GALERIE, Berlin/London; and kamel mennour, Paris/London. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Photo: Hyla Skopitz

New York

Metropolitan Museum Of Art

The Roof Garden Commission: Alicja Kwade, ParaPivot

April 16 – October 27, 2019

Late one Friday night in the middle of August, I stood on the deck of a ferry departing from the glowing environs of New York and was lucky enough to glance up from my phone in time to catch the inscrutable blackness of the night sky give way to countless stars. I was one text away from missing the event entirely. It is easy, in this age of screen-gazing, with our faces continuously tipped into the glow of our personal devices, to forget the world that stretches out beyond us; and in doing so, let die the species-old pursuit of trying to make sense of a magnitude too great to ever fully know.

Enter Berlin-based artist Alicja Kwade, recipient of this summer's commission for the Iris and B

Gerald Cantor Roof Garden of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, curated by Kelly Baum. Kwade's sleek and subtle installation *ParaPivot* (2019) resembles a diminutive planetary system come to rest on top of the museum. In two large-scale sculptures, *ParaPivot I* (2019) and *ParaPivot II* (2019), she erects a series of black powder-coated steel frames ranging from 8 to 12 feet high, which intersect at their bases and fan out in different directions, forming an array of geometric shapes that shift and change with an almost kinetic quality as viewers wander between and around them. From one perspective, the two sculptures stand separately; from another they merge into a single system of lines and angles. Seamlessly positioned among the frames, nine marble spheres nestle on the ground among the beams, balance on top of them, or float between them, as if held in place by unseen forces. Kwade selected marble from nine different locations, including Italy, Portugal, India, and Brasil. Swirls of pink, grey, snowy white, or navy—hues arising from the mineral composition of the land from which they have been excavated—give each sphere its own identity.

Rising above viewers' heads, the work is imposing, the steel armature and stone globes weighty; and yet its cleanness of form and understated palette coalesce into a quiet grace. The frames create visual borders around the treetops of Central Park, the high rise dwellings of the Upper West Side, and the Midtown skyline, breaking the rooftop view into picture postcard fragments. Their mathematical precision mirrors the architectural order of the glass towers that rise beyond them. Standing beneath the extension of black girders and looking up, I was reminded of Louise Bourgeois's giant spiders, and the feeling of being cradled.

The nine marble globes suggest the planets of our solar system (I staunchly include Pluto in my count), with each sphere positioned as if travelling its own unseen path. Their presence challenges the significance of the black frames; maybe they are sculptural interpretations of astrophysical theories, scientific abstractions superimposed on the cityscape within which the movement of the planets or their relationship to an unseen central star can be charted. The spheres diverge in size from that of a beach ball to something taller than the two-year-old I enviously spotted wrapping his arms around one. Bands of color variations along the circumferences of the spheres reveal the settling of the Earth into layers of rock in their regions of origin, and stand as a visual measurement of time in a medium formed over millions of years.

Along the side of the larger sculpture, *ParaPivot I*, a dappled sphere of greeny-blue and white Masi quartzite quarried from Finland hovers at eye-level between two of the black bars. With all the supports and engineering of the work hidden from view, its position seems risky, as if gravity or a strong wind might, at any moment, send it crashing into the museum below. Its resemblance to our own blue planet is uncanny, and its scaled-down size creates the sense of looking at the Earth from space, even as I inched so I close I could almost press my forehead against the smoothness of its surface.

This wobbling perception of size and relationship lies at the heart of the work; with every step, the sculptures and their components reform into new combinations. They tower overhead, yet it all seems manageable, a planetary system contained within a small garden. Kwade's use of optical illusion invites viewers to acclimate to a state of uncertainty, taking us to the outer edges of what our rational minds can explain as we engage with a work of fixed objects that continuously changes and unfolds. The result is a state of wonder that remained with me even as I descended back into the museum, my phone buried deep in my bag, forgotten at least for a while.

Contributor

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