

Chris Doyle

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Wave Hill Puts Spotlight on Art to Celebrate Its Gardens and Lure Visitors



Chris Doyle's outdoor installation at Wave Hill, "The Lightening," consists of three origami-like geometric towers that show animated loops of aquatic life.

By WINNIE HU, MAY 13, 2015

Summer has come early to a public garden in the Bronx: Dragonflies skim over clusters of lily pads in a lush aquatic garden in full August bloom. But only at night. In the evening, an outdoor installation at Wave Hill brings the garden to life with vivid animation and ethereal music. But during the day, the aquatic garden returns to its barren, postwinter state.

The installation by Chris Doyle is the centerpiece of a new \$250,000 exhibition, "Night Lights at Wave Hill," commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Hudson River estate in Riverdale that is celebrated for the artistry of its gardens. "Night Lights," which runs through May 24, pays homage to the destination art shows that Wave Hill was known for in the late 1970s and '80s, when works by Alexander Calder, Willem de Kooning, Henry Moore, Isamu Noguchi and Keith Haring were displayed on its grounds.

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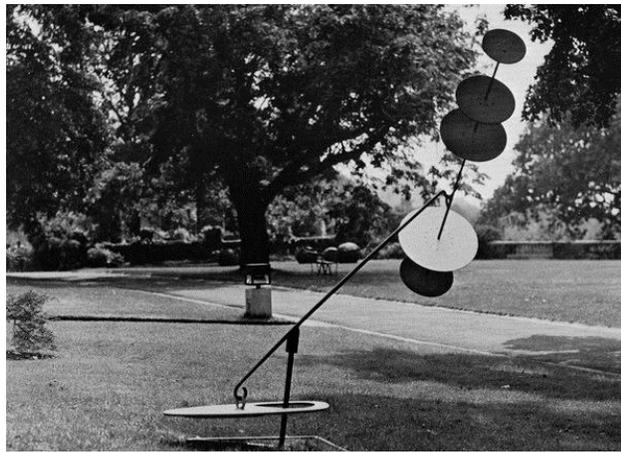
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The new exhibition aims to raise the visibility of the 28-acre public garden and cultural center, which for the first time is holding regular night hours, three times a week, for the exhibition. Though the number of visitors to Wave Hill has been growing steadily — reaching a record 155,000 last year — it is often overshadowed by its neighbor a few miles away, the 250-acre New York Botanical Garden, which has 900,000 visitors annually. Or as Wave Hill’s supporters like to say, it is like the Frick Collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



For the inaugural exhibition in 1977, Wave Hill borrowed 20 sculptures from the collection of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, including this one by Alexander Calder.

“When you’re 50, you want to go big,” said Claudia Bonn, the president and executive director of Wave Hill. “If you don’t think of bold, risky ideas, you really don’t catch people’s attention. You don’t really give people a chance to care about your institution.”

“Night Lights” features the work of Mr. Doyle, who won a Guggenheim Fellowship last year for his animation, some of which is being shown indoors in a gallery at Wave Hill. His outdoor installation, “The Lightning,” consists of three origami-like geometric towers that show three- to six-minute animated loops of aquatic life (coming from projectors concealed in two white pyramids). Music written for the installation by Jeremy Turner, a composer, and sung by the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, sets an exuberant mood.

One mesmerized man was seen circling the garden 10 times. Others arrived with friends, only to return by themselves for a more intimate, almost meditative experience.

“It doesn’t overpower the grounds,” said Frances Vignola, 27, an art gallery sales representative who lives on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and made her first trip to Wave Hill for the show. “You can still enjoy the aquatic garden and not be totally taken over by the art installation.”

Wave Hill, though rarely in the spotlight itself, has long been a backdrop for New York’s rich social and cultural history. Its stately fieldstone mansion, built by a well-to-do lawyer in 1843, was once a summer rental for the Roosevelt family, and where young Theodore developed his lifelong love of the outdoors. Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, also lived there for a time, and, though in his mid-60s, held tea parties in a treehouse on the back lawn.

After Wave Hill was donated to New York City in 1965, the nonprofit group charged with running it began laying out the landscape of artful flower gardens and rolling woodlands that would become its biggest draw. While the gardens were growing, they found another way to bring in visitors: big art shows.

For the inaugural exhibition in 1977, Wave Hill borrowed 20 sculptures by some of the biggest names in 20th-century art — Calder, de Kooning, Moore, Noguchi — from the collection of Joseph H. Hirshhorn. A 1982 show called “New Perspectives” brought Keith Haring’s sculpture of Venus in marker and enamel on cast fiberglass to one of its stone terraces. On a nearby lawn, Sol Lewitt created a temporary grid of gravel.

There were indoor shows as well, including a 1984 exhibition of floral images in photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, Lee Friedlander and Irving Penn.

By 1990, the big events were no longer needed as the gardens attracted visitors from as far as Australia, Brazil, Britain, China and Japan. Marco Polo Stufano, the founding director of horticulture, became known as the “dean of American horticulture.”

“We were presenting artists,” Ms. Bonn said. “But he was creating his own palette.”

Wave Hill shifted its focus to live music and dance performances, often set in the gardens. The art shows became smaller and tended to feature local and less established artists, or work that incorporated elements of the gardens and grounds. In 2010, for instance, Fred

Tomaselli, Philip Taaffe and Terry Winters collaborated on a group show of paintings and prints influenced by Wave Hill, all without getting paid.

“I love Wave Hill because it’s one of the most beautiful natural places in the city,” said Mr. Tomaselli, whose works have sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars. “Their gardens are inspirational. Showing my work in such a sublime place is its own reward.”

Wave Hill, which has an annual budget of \$5.8 million, began planning for “Night Lights” more than a year ago. Of the \$250,000 budget, half was allocated for the artwork, and the other half for installing lights on the grounds, hiring pianists to perform on exhibition nights and expanding staff hours and shuttle service.

Ms. Bonn and Jennifer McGregor, the director of arts, studied the works of more than 50 artists and met with five of them before choosing Mr. Doyle. “His use of animation and imagery is very in tune with the garden,” Ms. McGregor said. “He really got the garden. We didn’t have to explain it to him at all.”

Mr. Doyle, 54, first attracted notice in 1996 by gilding the staircase to the Williamsburg Bridge with 24-karat gold leaf for a public art project. Last July, he created an animated view of the Palisades that was shown on 46 Times Square screens just before midnight for the entire month.

He said he had spent the past year getting to know the aquatic garden, sitting for hours beside a stone pool filled with fish and plants. “I’m getting to the point where I almost know what plant is coming up when,” he said.

There were setbacks. It rained the day he began installing the work in April, and for three more days. He kept going. One 16-foot tower, constructed of plexiglass wedges covered with two-way mirror, was so blinding in the sunlight that he worried about “frying the fish and killing the grass.” He replaced the mirrored wedges with ones painted white.

But in the end, he accomplished what he set out to do.

“I’m using technology to create an experience in August that hasn’t happened,” he said. “If August was already here, you wouldn’t need this.”