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Carving out an art garden

In the shadow of the New Orleans Museum of Art,
a glorious \$25 million showcase of sculpture rises amid the ancient oaks

By Doug MacCash
Art critic

Any review of the new Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden is bound to be short and sweet: It's fabulous, it's free, it's not far away, the fall weather is fantastic and you should find your way there as soon as possible.

Precisely placed in the dappled pools of shade, on the glowing green lawns and amid the ligustrum brambles of City Park are 50 weatherproof works of art, including an elephant-sized bronze spider, a quartet of jogging giants, a troop of sci-fi silver monkeys, an Art Deco tortoise, a driftwood horse, a score of space-age angular abstractions and a dozen timelessly seductive nudes.

Every piece in the ensemble was created by an international art star past or present: Moore, Noguchi, Botero, Lachaise, Lipchitz, Agam, Butterfield, Bourgeois and on and on, in styles that run the gamut from realistic to outrageous. The new garden is a petting zoo of major 20th-century art movements.

It's all made possible by K&B drugstore magnate Sydney Besthoff, who, with wife Walda, has been collecting world-class sculpture since the mid-1970s. If you navigated Lee Circle any time in the past quarter-century, you probably noticed the collection

sprouting from the cement plaza surrounding the modernistic office building that housed the drugstore chain's headquarters. When Besthoff sold the 184-location empire in 1997, a question quickly climbed the art community grapevine: "What's going to happen to the sculpture collection?"

The answer lay amid the Spanish moss and squirrels in City Park.

Besthoff's scheme was simple and generous. He had already suggested to City Park director Beau Bassich that a parcel of public green space would be a perfect permanent home for his prize possessions. He offered to give the collection to the New Orleans Museum of Art and pick up a big part of the tab to produce the garden.

To make a much longer story short, Besthoff, Bassich and NOMA Director John Bullard eventually shook hands on the plan and, in 2001, sculpture garden construction began.

Those who've trod outdoor sculpture gardens across the country will agree that the setting of the Besthoff Garden is one of the best. New Orleans architect Lee Ledbetter and New York City landscape architect Brian Sawyer carved the new garden from a 5-acre patch of little-used pine grove and marsh beside the museum. Letting the soft, sultry character of the environment be their guide, they com-

posed a harmonious circuit of pathways that begin at a paved entry plaza, crisscross a syrup-slow lagoon, then wind languidly beneath the undulating oak trees near the Botanical Garden.

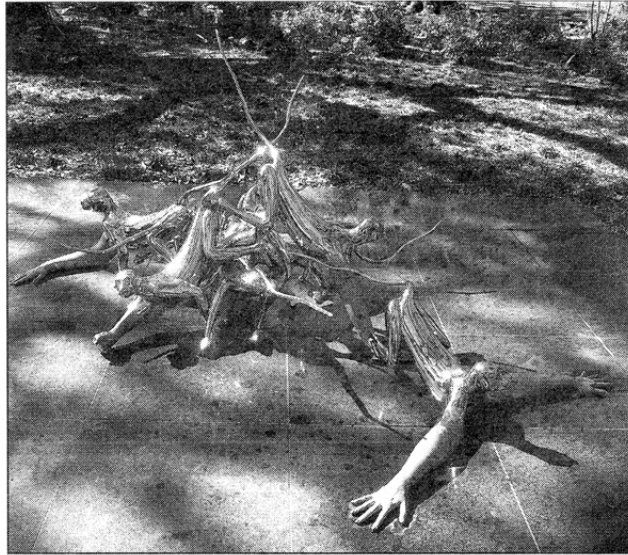
The new space would be a glorious addition to the venerable old park, even without the \$25 million sculpture collection. But the sculptures, of course, are the eggs in the omelet.

True, the collection could use a few more modernist trump cards — a Rodin, Calder, Giacometti, Smith, etc. — to put it on a par with older public collections, but it's more than a good start. The site will certainly become still another Crescent City must-see for sophisticated tourists. It will also eventually become one of the indelible images in the native New Orleanian's collective mind-scape, like the St. Charles Avenue streetcar, Cafe du Monde and Jackson Square. It's the newest cultural gem in the crown of the Queen City of the South.

To give a preview of the place, we solicited the comments of a few of the sculptors whose works are featured in the collection. Plus, we invited a few locally renowned sculptors to stroll through the garden in the days before its opening, lending insider insights to some of the selections.

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MONKEYS Created by Rona Pondick

“It’s layered with ideas, very humanistic, contemporary ideas. It poses a question about being human. ... It’s a representation of the fear that comes at a time of great scientific growth.”

NEW YORK ARTIST RONA PONDICK’S SCULPTURE

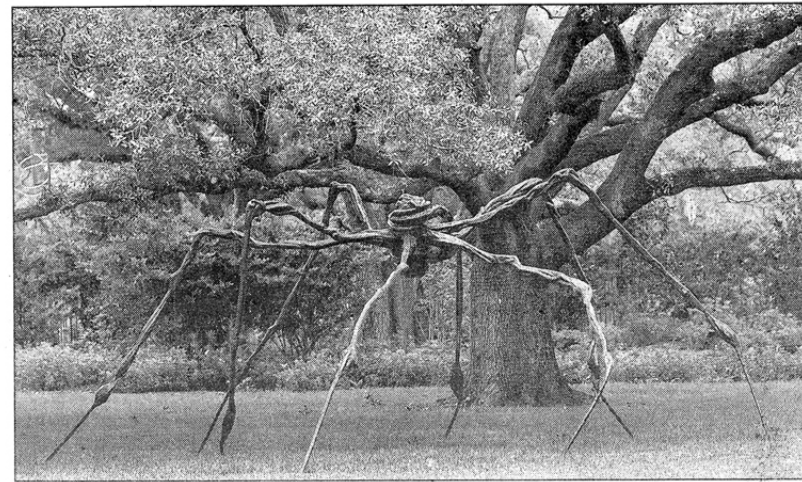
“MONKEYS” is a showstopper. There, beneath the branches of a live oak, lies a squirming mass of mirror-polished stainless steel simians, like something out of the movie “Terminator.” That would be weird enough, but if you look closely, you find that the monkeys’ paws and sometimes their faces have morphed into the ultra-realistic hands and faces of human beings. This required some explanation, but the 51-year old artist was coyly unwilling to give the slightest clue.

“Not to be difficult,” Pondick said, “but I tend to avoid answering questions about my art. Once I say what something is, it closes the door. There’s no right or wrong answer in art. If people see different things, I’m pleased.”

Jessica Goldfinch, a talented local sculptor whose outré style seems very compatible with Pondick’s eerie aesthetic, was eager to offer her reaction.

“It really draws you in,” she said, marveling at the gorgeously made tangle of monkeys. “It’s layered with ideas, very humanistic, contemporary ideas. It poses a question about being human. You have the non-human aspect in the identical monkeys and the great individuality in the detailed human faces and hands — you could probably see the fingerprints. I think it may have to do with cloning and DNA and other scientific advancements. It’s like Frankenstein being written at the time of Darwinism. It’s a representation of the fear that comes at a time of great scientific growth.”

THE SPIDER Created by Louise Bourgeois



STAFF PHOTOS BY KATHY ANDERSON

NINETY-TWO-YEAR-OLD LOUISE BOURGEOIS may be the most influential sculptor of the current post-modern era, and her 10-foot-tall “Spider,” an ominous bronze arachnid striding from beneath the shadows of a sprawling oak, may be the most arresting piece in the Besthoff Sculpture Garden.

Though most onlookers will find the creature a bit threatening, Bourgeois sees it as a nurturing presence. In a written response to our questions, the artist said: “My sculpture of the Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever.”

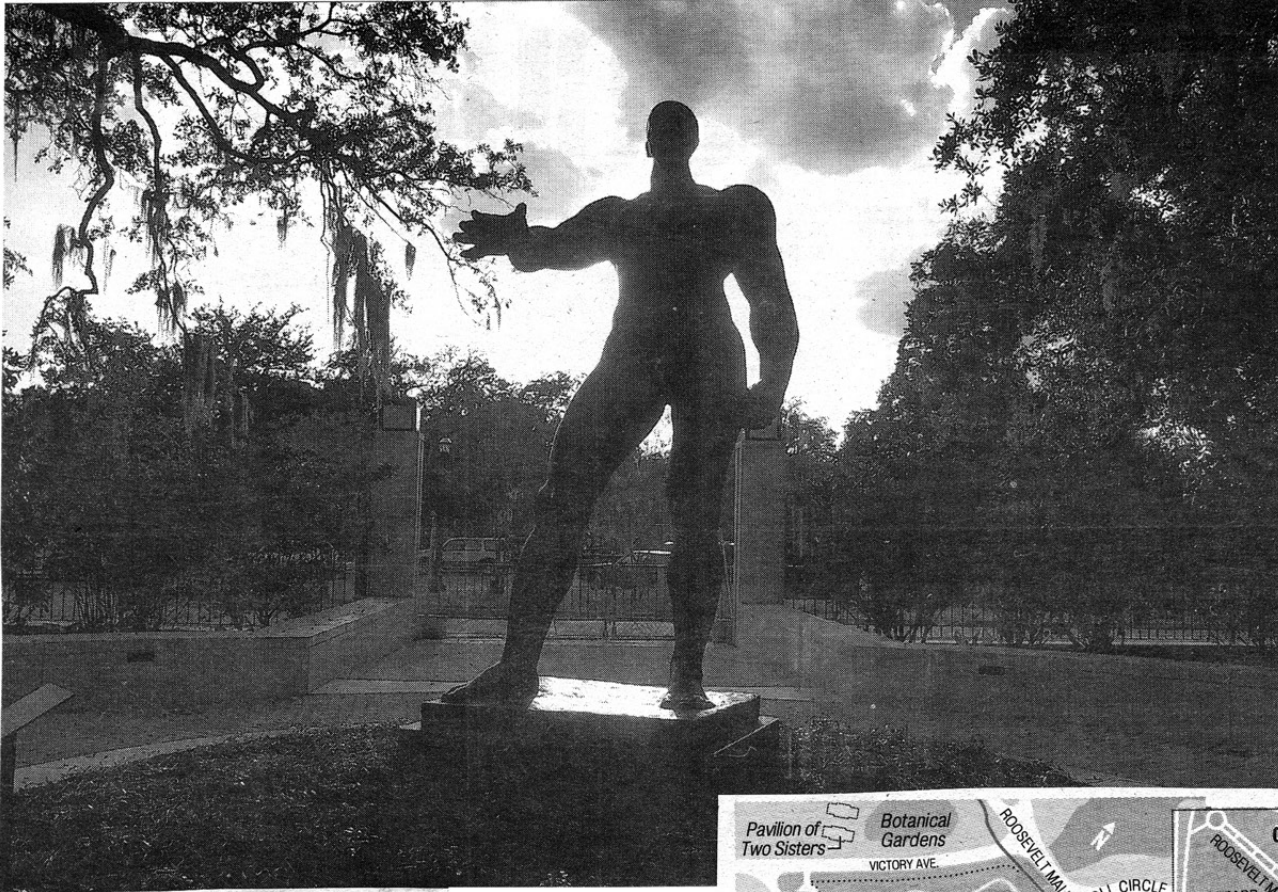
“I made drawings of spiders in the ‘40s. They were friendly presences that ate the mosquitoes. So, the spiders were helpful and protective, just like my mother.”

New Orleans sculptor Sally Heller became fascinated with the French-born master in the early ‘80s when she worked at Robert Miller Gallery, Bourgeois’ New York show-place.

“The spider is very unexpected,” Heller said. “In a sculpture garden you usually see static monolithic bronze shapes, but this is different. It has a strong sense of movement. I like that the legs mimic the trees.”

“Bourgeois’ work was always different. Men in her generation of artists were using industrial, hard-core materials such as steel. She was the first to use poured rubber and fabric and softer things in her work. More importantly, she wasn’t confined by the boundaries of the time. When everybody was into abstraction, she was into expressionism. She was always guided by her life, her past, her emotions. It was very taboo in 1960s and ‘70s sculpture to be emotional. She didn’t sell her first piece of art until she was 60.”

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Better known for his depictions of women, French-born Gaston Lachaise (1882-1935) occasionally produced a male figure. His 'Heroic Man,' of 1934, is the largest.

SYDNEY AND WALDA BESTHOFF SCULPTURE GARDEN

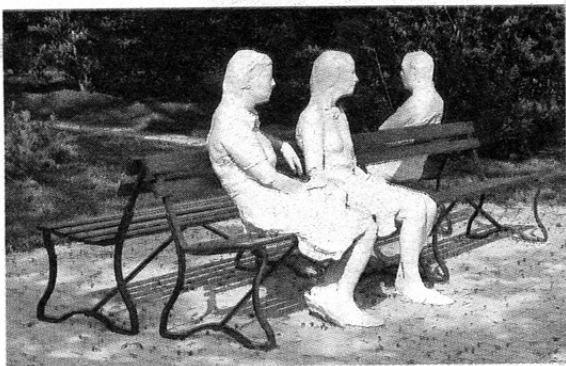
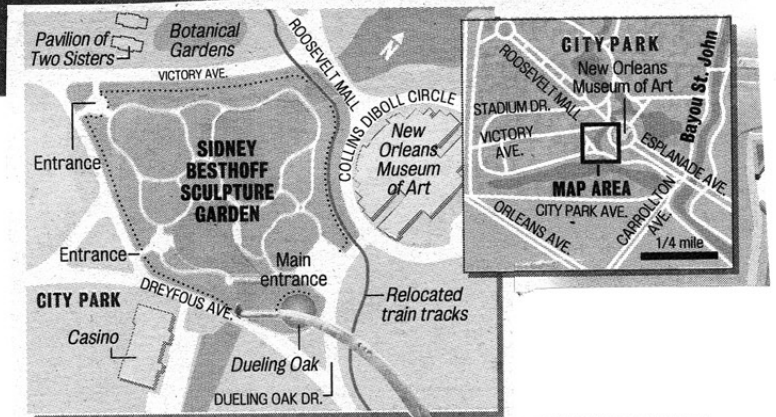
What: A new City Park attraction featuring 50 modern sculptures by an international line-up of artists, spread throughout a 5-acre landscape.

Where: Beside the New Orleans Museum of Art at 1 Dueling Oaks Drive.

When: The Besthoff Sculpture Garden opens to the public from 1 to 5 p.m. on Sunday, with a ribbon-cutting ceremony at 1, followed by a concert by the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra featuring Irvin Mayfield. A museum-members-only preview takes place from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday. Regular hours are Tuesday-Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Admission: Free

Phone: 488-2631.



Together yet alone: American George Segal (1924-2000) captures the urban sense of loneliness-in-a-crowd with his black and white figures in works such as 'Three Figures, Four Benches.'

A student of the legendary Auguste Rodin, French sculptor Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929) created the heroic bronze 'Hercules the Archer' in 1907. 'Hercules' and a handful of other pieces that have found a new home in the Besthoff Sculpture Garden have been part of the New Orleans Museum of Art permanent collection for years.

