



SPACE TO CREATE

*Winner of a 2014 National
to make art and influence*





Jo McCully

Medal of Arts, Ann Hamilton finds Ohio State an invigorating place for the next generation.

By Adam King

Ann Hamilton's mind is a constant work in process. When the Ohio State art professor takes a commission or starts a project, she visits the site and her thoughts begin to whirl.

She begins by "walking a space into [her] body," sensing what is there but perhaps isn't easily named or present — the space's "suppressed voice," she calls it — and what may be needed.

"That question informs the kinds of research I do, and it comes very intuitively," said Hamilton, a world-renowned artist best known for her large-scale public installations.

"Where are we now socially? What

are the voices we need to hear? What needs to be said? How do we find the form for our questions?

"We live in a world that is so constructed around dualistic and too-often oppositional thinking: Us from them. Past from future. High from low," she observed. "How do our habits of perception and categorization shift so that what we habitually describe as opposite are perceived as like rather than unlike? How is low part of high? Silence part of sound? If we shift how we name things, we shift how we think."

To talk to Hamilton is to be immersed in her world. Her words convey an unrelenting stream of

intelligent thought and grandiose ideas. So it stood out when, with a smile, she spoke about needing to buy makeup for the first time in years for a visit to the White House.

In magnificent company

President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama awarded Hamilton a 2014 National Medal of Arts — the highest honor the nation can bestow on an artist — in a September ceremony in the East Room. Author Stephen King, actress Sally Field and George Shirley, the Metropolitan Opera's first African American tenor, were among 20 people and organizations honored.

Left: These photographs are part of a new installation Ann Hamilton created for the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University. Above: Ann Hamilton works from this studio in Columbus' German Village.



New York City's mammoth Park Avenue Armory accommodated Hamilton's "event of a thread" in 2012.

For Hamilton, standing alongside such luminaries was humbling and inspirational. But equally meaningful to her was that the Greater Columbus Arts Council initiated her nomination.

"It was such a celebration and so joyful," she said. "I feel like I have some new friends and new conversations. It is giving me a moment to pause and think. To be intentional in a different way about the kinds of works, the kinds of publics and the kinds of places where I really want to put my questions right now."

The questions drive Hamilton's growth. If she keeps asking, she never stands still.

"She has a way of creating aesthetic experience without necessarily announcing, 'OK, it's art now,'" Seattle Art Museum curator Catharina Manchanda told *The Stranger* arts newspaper in 2014. "It's more a seduction."

Hamilton wants to expose her audience to a happening, an "associative experience," rather than drive a prescribed narrative. But she is acutely aware that not everyone who views her art grasps that notion.

In her 1993 work "tropos," Hamilton covered a former New York factory floor with a layer of horsehair. In its midst, a person sat at a desk, reading from a book and burning



"Tower" in Alexander Valley, California, features double helix stairs: one ascending and one descending. A view of the sky through the open top is reflected in a pool at the base.

away words with a stylus line by line.

One visitor asked Hamilton, "What does the horsehair mean?"

"And I said, 'Well, the horsehair just is. It means what it is: It is the cellular memory of the animal. It is evidence of biological time. It carries in it landscape and smell, the company of a companion species.'

"I think there's always this back and forth between our habits and using our language to enclose things rather than open them — which is why we need the poets, because they're always opening things for us, allowing us to see where we are, what is in front of us."

Awe-inspiring body of work

Hamilton's works are as diverse as the spaces they occupy. Though most are temporary, some are commissioned for permanence.

She recently put the finishing touches on a project for the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. Her "theatre is a blank page" collaboration at Ohio State just earned a Columbus Makes Art Excellence Award. And she has two \$1 million projects in progress: a Seattle waterfront installation and a creation of woven words for New York's Cortlandt Street subway station, which was destroyed on 9/11.

In her 2012 critically acclaimed "event of a thread" in New York's 55,000-square-foot Park Avenue Armory — a space that took Hamilton's breath away when she first witnessed its volume — patrons became part of the installation. They could sit on any of 42 swings to raise and lower a turbulent white curtain hanging within the cavernous space. Other elements included actors reading to pigeons in cages, their voices crackling through radios in paper bags that visitors carried with them. Above it all was a latticework of ropes and pulleys holding the curtain and swings in an interconnected system — homage to Hamilton's roots as a weaver.

"Cloth is the material that is always touching us. It is the first architecture of the body, and as my work grew, the form extended out to meet the architectural edge," Hamilton said. "So while my work doesn't look like a weaving, the relationships are woven."

Center of the art universe?

Under the tutelage of her mother and grandmother, Hamilton — born in Lima, Ohio, and raised in Columbus — learned how to knit and sew. She was always enthralled with how her grandmother could knit and read aloud at the same time. It created warm, social moments and, for Hamilton, it ensured language and creativity were forever entwined.

It's a theme that makes regular appearances in her work, including her permanent installation at Ohio State, 2011's "VERSE." Visitors who look down while in Thompson Library's Buckeye Reading Room see a literary dance embedded in the cork floor, where Hamilton threads the words from three books about the history of the world.

That Hamilton was even here to do the piece traces back to an emotional decision in 1991 to leave her tenure-track position at UC Santa Barbara and return to Ohio. The seed was planted by then-curator Sarah Rogers, who asked Hamilton to prepare a piece for the first exhibition in the Wexner Center for the Arts.

"Many of us couldn't live here if it wasn't for the Wexner Center," said Hamilton, who has a bachelor's degree in textile design from the University of Kansas and a master's in sculpture from Yale. She joined the Ohio State faculty in 2001 and has held the title of Distinguished University Professor in the Department of Art since 2011.

"It's isolating in some ways that

wouldn't be if I was on either coast," she said of living in Ohio. "But on the other hand, I also think it's allowed me to follow the nose of my work in a different way."

Her constant travel keeps her from feeling like an outlier in the art world, and she and husband-artist-Ohio State professor Michael Mercil teach the next generation of artists. Hamilton helps them establish their own artistic practice and, perhaps more importantly, shows them how to ask their own questions.



An invigorating exchange

In the same way that she opens herself up as she assesses a new space, Hamilton relishes how teaching is also about learning.

"That's what I love about working with graduate students," she said. "What are their influences? How are they thinking about making work in a technologically extended world? If I still have a pencil in my hand, and that's my first tool, their first tool is very different and influenced by that."

"Michael and I bring experience, and we have a perspective just because of time. But we're not in the same world they're in, because we're a different age. So that back and forth is always interesting." ★

In "VERSE" at Ohio State's Thompson Library, a two-color cork floor hosts a field of words organized in an alphabetic concordance. The words come from three world histories: a White River Sioux myth; A Little History of the World by E.H. Gombrich; and Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone by Eduardo Galeano.

Art images courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio

➤ **SEE MORE** Learn more about Hamilton's art at annhamiltonstudio.com. For more on Ohio State's Department of Art, visit art.osu.edu.