

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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## Sculpture Finds a Parking Space on the High Line

Nari Ward's 'Smart Tree' joins a handful of other new artworks at the New York City park



Park-goers check out Nari Ward's sculpture 'Smart Tree' on the High Line. *PHOTO: MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Traffic was heavier than usual on the High Line park last week, when the usual pedestrian parade made way for an unusual presence: a car.

This one differed from others zipping by on the streets below: hollowed out, its engine removed, pushed by a heaving crew with an artist steering it into position to assume its new role as a sculpture.

The automotive art, a Smartcar with tire treads and other embellishments adorning its body, is the work of Nari Ward, a sculptor known for exploring memory and one's sense of place, often by transforming familiar materials found close to home.

For his piece “Smart Tree,” the artist, who emigrated from the Caribbean at age 12, drew on a recollection of an abandoned car in his father’s yard in Jamaica. Raised on cinder blocks for repair work that never got done, the vehicle rusted, and nature took hold: A lime tree sprouted through the floorboards, seeding deterioration with regrowth.



A crew of three pushed the Smartcar to its spot on the High Line on April 20. *PHOTO: ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Art handlers Jean-Claude Campell, in brown, and Matt Paulson pushed the Smartcar as artist Nari Ward steered his sculpture. *PHOTO: ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

On the High Line, the plant life is an apple tree rising out of a Smartcar’s sunroof high above West 23rd Street, where it will remain to be gawked at and puzzled over for a year.

But first it had to get there. The journey began last Wednesday, when, after formative work at Mr. Ward’s Harlem studio and a lift from a freight elevator near the High Line’s southernmost end, the car took a spin through throngs of surprised park-goers.



High Line Art Production Manager Jordan Benke inside 'Smart Tree.' PHOTO: ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“Heads up, we’ve got a car coming through,” said Jordan Benke, production manager for High Line Art, which commissioned the sculpture and helped bring it to life. He added a note for the artist in charge: “Remember, no power steering.”

Mr. Ward stood up through the sunroof, his hands on the wheel below. A crew of three pushed from behind, rolling it past an array of park life: a class of children drawing, music from an accordion, a vocal duo busking.

Visitors out for a stroll cast approving and quizzical looks.

“Brilliant, man!,” cheered John Bloch, a tourist from New Mexico, where Smartcars—much less ones used for art—aren’t a common sight, he said.

“Smart Tree” joins a handful of other new artworks on the High Line, including Tony Matelli’s “Sleepwalker,” a startlingly realistic sculpture of a man frozen mid-stride in his underwear, and a large wall painting by Barbara Kruger painted with the words: “Blind idealism is deadly.”

After about half an hour, and more than 10 blocks from where they started, Mr. Ward and his crew backed into their spot above West 23rd Street, where the car’s wheels have since been replaced with cinder blocks and its interior filled with soil for the apple tree.

“The High Line is this very strange space surrounded by movement, the sense that you’re going somewhere else,” Mr. Ward said of the link between the setting and the automotive subject matter. “You’re not here to spend time as much as to experience this strange amalgamation of stasis and flux.”

The tire treads covering the car's exterior echo that sense of movement. And the tree—along with headlights that flash on at night thanks to solar panels installed in the windshield—evoke a life force at work.

“I didn’t want it to rest in the key of a post-apocalyptic narrative,” the 52-year-old artist said. “I wanted a sense of repurposing and hopefulness in it.”

Lili Chadeaux, a 10-year-old visiting the High Line from Boston, picked up the sentiment fast. “It’s cool,” she said, “and it’s recycling.”

Mr. Ward said “Smart Tree” continues a strain in his art devoted to ideas of resourcefulness common in his native Jamaica and “any so-called Third World country, where folks have to find a way to make do and improvise with what they have. That is something I like to honor in my work.”

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Other works of the sort include “Mango Tourist,” a 2011 series of hulking sculptures made with fruit-like strips of orange foam, and “Sugar Hill Smiles,” a 2014 project that involved collecting smiles from Harlem residents he had peer into mirrors placed in the bottom of metal cans.

In “Smart Tree,” the remembrance of a discarded, deteriorating clunker evolved into a new car that will wither and grow in the elements just the same. Park-goers can watch it happen to the surprising vehicular transplant in the midst of leisurely strolls.

“It’s remaking their own experience,” Mr. Ward said, “by remaking that thing they think they know.”