Hugh Hayden
Hugh Hayden
*Brier Patch*

**Madison Square Park Conservancy 2022**
Hugh Hayden  
*Brier Patch*

**January 18-May 1, 2022**
Madison Square Park  
New York

**May 14-September 18, 2022**
North Carolina Museum of Art  
Raleigh

**Commissioned by**
Madison Square Park Conservancy

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Madison Square Park Conservancy  
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Deputy Director and Martin Friedman Chief Curator

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Introduction
Brooke Kamin Rapaport

What does it mean to bring a project like Hugh Hayden’s *Brier Patch* into public space, something made of one of the most familiar workaday things in our lives: an elementary school desk? The project is stunning and stark. It is a reckoning, a surreal vision of an object gone awry, an object we have physically inhabited as our own in the classroom. *Brier Patch* is unexpected and unsettling. It begins with replicas of one hundred elementary school–style desks installed across four lawns. Through repetition, the work is by turns head-spinning and optimistic, confounding and foreboding. Hayden has transformed inert symbols of classroom culture—the placid surfaces of the seats and tabletops where children usually sit and learn—with erupting, surging tree branches. Ultimately those branches cohere into tangled assemblies of complex meaning associated with education and advancement and dour seats of learning that linger in stasis, witnesses to the overgrowth of nature. The incorporated branches in *Brier Patch* derive from wood planks that are integral to each desk.

Hayden presents an uncomfortable encounter with the promise of the American Dream and the mythmaking that surrounds progress. He has even offered one group of twenty-five desks without branches, on Veterans Lawn in the southwest of the park. Here, he welcomes students and educators, individuals and groups—everyone—to interact with the work for contemplation or convening.

The artist is known for taking forms from everyday objects and reconstructing them. If the Dada and conceptual art of Marcel Duchamp (French, 1887–1968) seems an initial influence, the deep discontentment and surreal visual language of Hayden’s work is more closely aligned with Robert Gober (American, b. 1954), David Hammons (American, b. 1943), and Doris Salcedo (Colombian, b. 1958), artists a generation or two older. There are references to the Minimalist movement in his insistent repetition of objects and in the installation’s grid pattern, where desks become outdoor classrooms, rigidly located through uniform spacing.
Hayden’s independent vision draws from his personal memory and experience as an American and African American and from the allegory of lessons conveyed through folklore traditions that, like many historical accounts, promote the history of certain figures while overlooking others. The implied tensions that coexist in *Brier Patch* prompt viewer reflection on political symbolism in folklore, oral traditions, and education.

Tales of the brier patch and the fate of Br’er Rabbit, Br’er Fox, Br’er Wolf, and the Tar-Baby were told in many countries before 1881, when Joel Chandler Harris published *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* in the United States. The Uncle Remus stories—folktales that an elderly Black man living in a Southern plantation cabin recounts to a white boy from the plantation owner’s family—describe animal contests and trickery. The Uncle Remus stories and the popular 1946 Disney film *Song of the South* that followed have been condemned and critiqued for upholding lore around an apocryphal idyllic Southern plantation life. Hayden has described how the brier patch can be a protective place as well as a site of grave potential danger; it can function as a metaphoric refuge or prison. Hayden doesn’t remember these particular stories from childhood; in graduate school, however, a faculty member recommended them to him as a source.

*Brier Patch* also calls to mind the linearity and regimented arrangement of tombstones commemorating military burials in national cemeteries. Hayden describes those tombstones, like the rows of chairs he designates, as each being a representation of a body, or a stand-in for an individual.

Hugh Hayden was born in Dallas in 1983. He uses wood as his primary medium, often carrying complex histories of their origins, including objects as varied as discarded tree trunks, Christmas trees, metal cooking pans, and souvenir African sculptures. He saws, weaves, sculpts, and sands the material, creating works that reflect and transform cultural histories. His solo exhibitions include *Boogey Men* at ICA Miami (2021–22) and *Creation Myths* at the Princeton University Art Museum (2020), and a show at White Columns, New York (2018), where a version of *Brier Patch* was installed. He is planning a New York City group exhibition, *Black Atlantic*, with the Public Art Fund (2022).

Hayden holds a bachelor of architecture degree from Cornell University and an MFA from Columbia University. In 2020, with Lisson Gallery and CLEARING gallery, he established the Solomon B. Hayden Fellowships in memory of his father at the Columbia University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and the School of the Arts.

*Brier Patch* is accompanied by public programs including a story circle with Hayden and artists Leilah Babiriye, Alex Da Corte, Hannah Levy, and Kathleen Ryan and moderator Jon Kessler that addressed how artists can afford graduate education, where that education may lead, and the impact of studio critique on their practice. Hayden has generously led many groups through *Brier Patch* and described the process of realizing the work and the implications of its meaning. A concert featuring the InterSchool Orchestras of New York, with high school musicians drawn from the five boroughs, brought students physically adjacent to *Brier Patch* as their presence fills and invigorates the artwork with vital participation.

Like all of Madison Square Park Conservancy’s exhibitions, *Brier Patch* could not have been realized without the consistent and generous support of the Conservancy's
Board of Trustees, including Sheila Davidson, Board Chair, and David Berliner, Chair Emeritus. Deepest thanks to Ron Pizzuti, Art Committee Chair, for his care for artists and public art and to Sarah Stein-Sapir, who, as founder of the Conservancy’s Art Council, has energized a community around the art program. Keats Myer, Executive Director, leads the Conservancy with great empathy and focus. My exceptional colleague Tom Reidy, Deputy Director for Finance and Special Projects, worked closely over many months with Hugh Hayden on all aspects of this project. Our wonderful colleague Truth Murray-Cole brings her invaluable efforts to the art program. Please join me in expressing gratitude to Madison Square Park Conservancy’s outstanding staff, listed on page 45 of this volume, for working together throughout the pandemic to bring Brier Patch to fruition.
Our thanks to Viana Segarra and Jim Cummings at Showman Fabricators in Bayonne, New Jersey. In the Hugh Hayden studio, our thanks to Annabel Auger, Peter DeFrancesca, Michael Dispensa, and Emmett Sponheim.

I wish to recognize and thank Alex Logsdail and Thalassa Balanis at Lisson Gallery. We appreciate the support from our colleagues at the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation: Jonathan Kuhn, Jennifer Lantzas, and Elizabeth Segarra. Thank you to Miko McGinty and Rebecca Sylvers for their beautiful graphic design. Lynda Churilla, Jasper DeWitt, Mark Gallucci, Rashmi Gill at Vivid Clicks and Yasunori Matsui have trained their lenses to document the work. It is a great honor for Madison Square Park Conservancy to work again with Valerie L. Hillings, Director, and Linda Dougherty, Chief Curator and Curator of Contemporary Art, at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, where Brier Patch will travel this spring and summer.

The Board, staff, and artists whose work we commission express ongoing gratitude to those who so generously support the art program that has made Brier Patch possible. Those supporters are listed on page 43.

We are grateful to Dr. Seph Rodney and to Dr. Carla Shedd for their contributions to this volume. In his insightful response, Rodney takes Brier Patch as a catalyst to analyze ingrained systems of learning. His focus on Hayden’s entwined branch structure is as a metaphor for the optimism around entanglement as social cohesion. Shedd’s deeply searching text focuses on the physicality of Brier Patch, inherent lived and symbolic tension in classroom space, and a vision towards future promise.

With Brier Patch, Hugh Hayden has affirmed that public art has an inspirational and provocative role in realizing powerful, stunning work and in furthering public debate on such topics as American education and the challenges and traumas exposed across the past two years of pandemic and political turmoil. Hayden’s project is not a position paper on education. Rather, he has prompted dialogue, profound thought, and action on learning, an essential requirement of civil society.
Artist’s Statement
Hugh Hayden

I was raised in Texas and trained as an architect, and my work arises from a deep connection to nature and its organic materials. Little did I know that my childhood passion for gardening and creating landscapes around koi ponds in my adolescence would sow the seeds for me to become an artist who embraces natural materials.

I use salvaged pieces of wood as my primary medium, frequently loaded with multilayered histories in their origin—objects as varied as Christmas trees, discarded furniture, souvenir African figures, and rare indigenous timbers, like Texas ebony, which I consider my identity in wood form. From these disparate elements I carve, saw, and sand the wood, creating new, composite forms that reflect their complex cultural backgrounds. I intentionally combine traditional orthogonal woodworking techniques with freehand carving to make sculptural forms that have no straight lines, and are consequently sinuous and anthropomorphic. Crafting metaphors for human existence and past experience through wood, my work questions social dynamics and asks viewers to examine their place within the ever-shifting ecosystem that is the American Dream, an environment both seductive and threatening.
You might notice several things happening as you make your way through Hugh Hayden’s Brier Patch at Madison Square Park. You will likely notice that the studiously replicated wooden tablet arm desks, planted in the soil in precise rows, convey discipline and order. The chairs—cut, cornered, and sanded down to a clean uniformity—evoke that key purpose of primary and secondary schools: to mold young people into citizens who can more or less find their place in a complex, multicultural society that is supposed to function as a meritocracy. More than just tools for keeping students relatively still and in ordered schemes, with an apparatus that allows for personalized note taking and writerly engagement, the chairs are also a sign. They represent—as much as, if not more than, school uniforms or a blackboard—the systems of formal public education that define elementary or grade school, middle school, and high school here in the United States.

Generally, the central function of these formalized education systems is to, in some way, get us all “on the same page,” and thus, in most parts of the world, primary and secondary education is compulsory. You have to participate, because if you don’t, the danger to the community is too great. You might come off the rails, not know how to manage your finances, not know how to de-escalate a potentially harmful conflict, not know how to properly leave a public restroom for the next person who will use it, not protect the most vulnerable among us who need to be protected, not know better than to participate in a violent insurrection. Symbolically and practically in a typical schoolroom, and here in Hayden’s installation in each discrete “classroom,” the desks all face the same direction—the uniformity of shape and manufacture mirrors the uniformity of civic orientation. We may not initially hold the same values, but schools are the key institutions that bring together teachers, administrators, curricula, and students in a space that focuses attention on inculcating the basic skills of rational thinking, mathematical calculation, social comportment, and literacy. You know you have these skills,
because if you see people in front of you who behave as if
they don’t, you want to cross to the other side of the street.

But on the other hand, schooling, particularly second-
ary education, also asks you to begin to find yourself,
to differentiate yourself within the generalized lessons, to
discover who you are by way of what you are interested
in doing with your labor, which may lead to a vocational
calling. In all the fluid and shifting modes of identity
available to students today, schooling continues to ask a
basic question that it has asked since it was instituted
as a system: What will you make your life’s work? And
schooling also consists of a series of tests by which we sift
the population, looking for clues that will answer that query.

_Brier Patch_ hints at this classifying activity, as it breaks
up into discrete classrooms, each occupying a single lawn
in the park. And with this segregation, the work indicates
what eventually happens through schooling: More than just
categorization, schools institute value rankings. Schools
measure students and make judgments about their

FIG. 13

individual potential, whether they will attempt higher
education, what colleges they may attend, and ultimately,
to a great degree, what kind of neighborhoods they will live
in, how much money they will earn, what quality of life they
will enjoy, what schools their own children will attend.

There is difference here in all the wild and contorted
branches. But crucially the difference isn’t ranked. Hayden
isn’t making any implicit judgment about the relative worth
of these singular, independent desks that each stand in for
a single student. In fact, the artist has told me that although
the tablet arm desks each have their own naturally unique
shape, they exist in a physical network that actually helps
them support one another in harsh weather. By itself one
might be picked up and tossed by the wind. But together
they hold one another down.

In this differentiation and solidarity _Brier Patch_ illustrates
two opposing and contradictory aspects at the heart of
the formal education system: that it is structured to bring
immanent difference to the surface so that it can be utilized
for individual achievement, and at the same time, that it seeks to embed us in a network of people who are broadly educated in the same way so that we can form a civic society, so that in moments of need and crisis we will save one another from neglect.

By this emphasis on the cooperative network, *Brier Patch* comes at the American Dream from the other direction—not the story of heroic individual achievement despite the odds, through sheer grit and determination and some unique sense of purpose, but through the narrative of the community, the village. The work asks us who might inhabit these chairs. What kind of student will you imagine? It may not even be a student. Perhaps there is a guidance counselor who sits next to a charge and gives advice, or a parent or concerned teacher, a school principal, a coach, a friend. Who else might sit in that chair who can mitigate the deep structural inequities that affect how different student populations respond to the trial of regimented, scholastic instruction? We know that many students in this system fail to find themselves or a way to viable employment within the time frame allotted them. These chair desks are fashioned from cedar, most often used for outdoor furniture because of its natural resistance to insects and weather. They are resilient and can survive inclement conditions, but nonetheless they are vulnerable. Some do wither and die.

Hugh Hayden asks you to imagine a learning environment in which the differences that sprout from students and are imprinted on them at a young age—differences in talents, socioeconomic circumstances, body shape, physical aptitudes—don’t fully determine their life chances. He is asking you to imagine a different kind of American Dream.
When Protection and Peril Collide
Dr. Carla Shedd

In his most expansive and public art exhibition to date, Hugh Hayden offers us *Another Kind of Public Education* toward a fuller understanding of America’s possibilities. I first encountered Hayden’s work at Lisson Gallery on a hot afternoon in July 2021. Even though six long church pews swathed in prickly red bristles dominated the first exhibition space for *Huey* at that New York gallery, I was immediately drawn to the lone school desk in the far corner, covered in rigid beige bristles. This desk and all that it signaled to me about one’s place and (dis)comfort in educational spaces was only a hint of what was to come in the next iteration of Hayden’s artistic endeavors.

In my own work, I map positionality and proximity. I gauge exposure to violence and perceptions of opportunity. I empirically capture the inputs, processes, and outcomes of justice. Matrices and continua help me organize my analyses. Black Thought, Black Life, and Black Freedom are never marginalized, but are situated dead center. Tangled traumas. Weaved woes. Into the Brier Patch we go . . .

On a frosty opening night in January 2022, I approached the exhibition from the southwest corner of Madison Square Park as the sun began to set, not knowing what to expect. As a sociologist of race, place, education, and justice, I was delighted that section was where I began, since the lawn was open and the desks were accessible (though unmovable, firmly attached to the ground). But perhaps this should be the place where one’s experience with the exhibition would end, with visitors taking a seat to contemplate and discuss what I had yet to see.

I then moved to the Oval Lawn, which had at least fifty desks arranged in orderly rows as in a classroom. This time I noticed that the base of each desk had turned-over soil resembling that of newly dug graves and, in contrast to the previous section, each desk surface erupted with a tangle of branches where one usually would sit and write. I took time to scrutinize the other masked onlookers in multiple downy layers (it was near freezing that night), wondering
from which part of this unequal city\(^2\) they had emerged to view these works and to where they would return. I wondered whether the conjoined states of peril and protection of the brier patch were representative of my Harlem neighborhood, where the folkloric inspiration for this art might be more familiar. I pondered whether the bare branches and rigid composition of lines upon which the desks were arranged marked how Black art can bring a diverse array of people together underneath a cosmopolitan canopy,\(^3\) but even so we still may end up Black in White space.\(^4\)

How do these configurations structure the ways we come together to engage, to learn, and to grow? How are our individual lives seemingly disconnected, while our fates remain inextricably linked?

I approached the next section of the exhibition with great anticipation, seeing the third set of desks with branches reaching out to the sky facing the playground that dominates the north section of the park. Unlike the picture of the jail playground\(^5\) formerly located on the grounds of the Tompkins Houses in Brooklyn that I featured in a commentary in the catalog for the 2021 MoMA exhibition *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America*,\(^6\) this playground was not a harbinger of criminalization to come for its target audience. This playground has two friendly nutcracker-looking sentinels at its entrance and honors the only female NYPD officer who died on 9/11, Moira Ann Smith. Her title, “Police Officer,” prominently introduces her name, so I cannot help thinking of the routine encounters young people have with police, not only in public parks and playgrounds but also in public school entrances, hallways, and even classrooms. Now standing between the two sites, one that honored the life of a true shero, who evacuated people from the South Tower before its collapse, while simultaneously playing in my mind the memory of a video, from several years ago, of a Black sixteen-year old female student at Spring Valley High in South Carolina being violently ejected from her desk by school resource officer Ben Fields because she failed to remove her cell phone from her school desk earlier that day.\(^7\) Yes, these branches represent the tangled traumas and weaved woes of children who reconcile peril alongside possibility every day, well beyond the borders of Madison Square Park.

These gnarled eruptions in tombstone formations also represent the loss of children around the world who may never return to classrooms. Hayden uses cedar trees just like the ones that shaded the founder of my alma mater, Dr. Laurence C. Jones, in Piney Woods, Mississippi, who in 1909 began to teach the children of sharecroppers and the grandchildren of former slaves, including my own grandfather Charles M. Shedd, Sr. These branches represent the forms of knowledge we had to till in our own soil because school systems in this country failed to cultivate the educational prospects of Black people. How do we understand education in a time when multiple sanctuaries of Black lives and Black excellence, our Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), are subjected to bomb threats during Black History Month?\(^8\) How do we address the substance of what is and what is not taught in schools while school boards and state legislatures across America ban lessons on structural racism and, supposedly, “Critical Race Theory” in K-12 educational institutions?\(^9\)

Walking to the fourth and final site of the exhibition, I discover two desks facing each other in much closer proximity than all the others with their branches intertwined.
This is the promise of the exhibition—the promise of learning. This is how we begin again toward connecting with one another and fulfilling this country’s promise of opportunity and democracy.

The trajectory of the ascending branches is in direct contrast to the roots grounding Harriet Tubman in Alison Saar’s permanent art installation Swing Low, on 122nd Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Harlem. Charging forward like an unyielding conductor while turned south toward Madison Square Park, I see Tubman’s roots transformed into Hayden’s branches pointing upward with hope that Black freedom will soon come.

1. Patricia Hill Collins, Another Kind of Public Education: Race, Schools, the Media, and Democratic Possibilities (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).
Hugh Hayden

1985  Born in Dallas
2007  B. Arch., Cornell University
2018  MFA, Columbia University

Lives and works in Brooklyn

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

2022  *Brier Patch*
Cedar and aluminum
One hundred objects; 75 with branches, each approximately 96 × 96 × 96 inches; 25 without branches, each 36 × 28 × 27 inches
Collection the artist, courtesy Lisson Gallery
Commissioned by Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York

To learn more about *Brier Patch*, please visit https://madisonsquarepark.org/art/exhibitions/hugh-hayden-brier-patch/
Support

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Madison Square Park Conservancy is a public/private partnership with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation.
Acknowledgments

Madison Square Park Conservancy is the not-for-profit organization whose mission is to protect, nurture, and enhance Madison Square Park, a dynamic seven-acre public green space, creating an environment that fosters moments of inspiration. The Conservancy is committed to engaging the community through its dynamic public art program, beautiful gardens, and inviting amenities. Madison Square Park Conservancy is licensed by the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation to manage Madison Square Park and is responsible for raising 100% of the funds necessary to operate the park, including the brilliant horticulture, park maintenance, sanitation, security, and free cultural programs for park visitors of all ages.

Eric Adams
Mayor
City of New York

Susan M. Donoghue
Commissioner
New York City Department of Parks & Recreation

Land Acknowledgment
Madison Square Park is located on Lenapehoking, the ancestral homeland of the Lenape (Delaware) people. We recognize that this land was forcibly taken, resulting in the displacement and genocide of the Lenape (Delaware) Nations. Madison Square Park Conservancy respectfully acknowledges the Lenape (Delaware) people—past, present, and future—who continue to live, work, and connect to this land.

The Conservancy honors the Lenape (Delaware) people, the original stewards of this land, through our commitment to a series of sustainability and restoration initiatives. In the coming years, we aim to reduce our carbon imprint, promote sustainable land management, and reintroduce to the park species of fauna and flora indigenous to Lenapehoking.

For more information on Madison Square Park Conservancy and its programs, please visit madisonsquarepark.org.
Public Programs

FEBRUARY 22, 2022
Story Circle: Artists on Their Art Education
Leila Babirye
Alex Da Corte
Hugh Hayden
Hannah Levy
Kathleen Ryan
Moderator: Jon Kessler
Sony Square and Livestream

MARCH 15, 2022
Hugh Hayden and Dr. Carla Shedd speak on Brier Patch
Madison Square Park

MARCH 28–APRIL 3, 2022
Reflection Board
Parkgoers respond to “What does education mean to you?”
Madison Square Park

APRIL 26, 2022
Concert with InterSchool Orchestras of New York
Madison Square Park

WEDNESDAYS FROM JANUARY 19–APRIL 27, 2022
Lunchtime exhibition tour
Madison Square Park Conservancy Exhibitions

2021  Maya Lin *Ghost Forest*
2020  Abigail DeVille *Light of Freedom*
       Krzysztof Wodiczko *Monument*
2019  Leonardo Drew *City in the Grass*
2018  Arlene Shechet *Full Steam Ahead*
       Diana Al-Hadid *Delirious Matter*
2017  Erwin Redl *Whiteout*
       Josiah McElheny *Prismatic Park*
2016  Martin Puryear *Big Bling*
2015  Teresita Fernández *Fata Morgana*
       Paula Hayes *Gazing Globes*
2014  Tony Cragg *Walks of Life*
       Rachel Feinstein *Folly*
       Iván Navarro *This Land Is Your Land*
2013  Giuseppe Penone *Ideas of Stone (Idee di pietra)*
       Orly Genger *Red, Yellow and Blue*
       Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder *Topsy-Turvy: A Camera Obscura Installation*
2012  Leo Villareal *BUCKYBALL*
       Charles Long *Pet Sounds*
2011  Jacco Olivier *Stumble, Hide, Rabbit Hold, Bird, Deer, Home*
       Alison Saar *Feallan and Fallow*
       Jaume Plensa *Echo*
       Kota Ezawa *City of Nature*
2010  Jim Campbell *Scattered Light*
       Antony Gormley *Event Horizon*
       Ernie Gehr *Surveillance*
2009  Shannon Plumb *The Park*
2007  Roxy Paine *Conjoined, Defunct, Erratic*
       William Wegman *Around the Park*
2006  Ursula von Rydingsvard *Bowl with Fins, Czara z Babelkami, Damski Czepek, Ted's Desert Reigns*
2005  Jene Highstein *Eleven Works*
2004  Mark di Suvero *Aesop's Fables, Double Tetrahedron, Beyond*
2003  Wim Delvoye *Gothic*
2002  Dan Graham *Bisected Triangle, Interior Curve*
       Mark Dion *Urban Wildlife Observation Unit*
       Dalziel + Scullion *Voyager*
2001  Navin Rawanchaikul *I ♥ Taxi*
       Teresita Fernández *Bamboo Cinema*
       Tobias Rehberger *Tsutsumu N.Y.*
2000  Tony Oursler *The Influence Machine*

From 2000 to 2003, exhibitions were presented by the Public Art Fund on behalf of the Campaign for the New Madison Square Park.
Unless otherwise noted, all work is
Hugh Hayden (American, b. 1983)
Brier Patch, 2022
Cedar and aluminum
One hundred objects; 75 with branches, each approximately 96 × 96 × 96 inches;
25 without branches, each 36 × 28 × 27 inches
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