



ARTWORK **BEARING WITNESS**

ARTIST **MARTIN PURYEAR**

INSTALLED 1997  
RONALD REAGAN BUILDING AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE CENTER  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

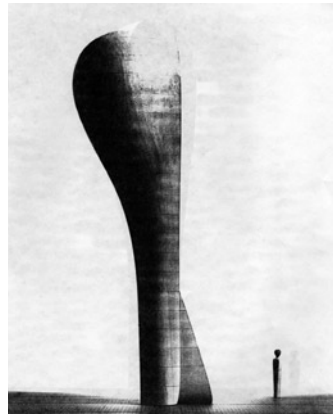
Martin Puryear's *Bearing Witness* is a colossal sculpture of hammer-formed and welded bronze. While its taut surfaces and hull-like forms may recall those of a boat (indeed it was fabricated at a precision shipbuilding facility), the sculpture's familiar-yet-enigmatic shapes allow viewers to create their own associations. Puryear has said: "In my work, I aim for a point where organic form—or forms which suggest nature and organic processes—can coexist with forms which are clearly cultural." He also intends this artwork to be perceived as a handcrafted object, despite its immense size and need to withstand the climatic conditions of its exterior location. Puryear allows the weld-marks and other idiosyncratic details of its fabrication to be seen, much as he does in his smaller-scale artworks that are made of wood.

The sculpture's poetic title similarly invites multiple interpretations. Puryear often selects titles that are, in his words, "provocative and open up possible ways for people to look at the work and think about the work rather than close it down." *Bearing Witness* suggests an observer, perhaps even the collective consciousness of the public.

The location of *Bearing Witness* affects its meaning, as well. The sculpture stands in the grand, semicircular courtyard in front of the Reagan Building's Woodrow Wilson Center. Viewed from certain angles, the rounded shape at the top of *Bearing Witness* forms a concentric arc with the curving façade of the building. Architect James Ingo Freed viewed the sculpture "as a column pinning the space to the ground." The plaza's space is vast, as are the two massive federal buildings that surround it. Puryear's sculpture serves as both a physical and metaphorical intermediary between viewers and the government buildings. In a 1998 *Sculpture* magazine interview, Puryear stated: "This is one of the more challenging pieces I've done, because it's in such an official public place... Its context is weighted. For myself, I wanted my work to be directed toward people rather than toward the government. In a democracy, the people talk back to the government." SH/WC

BEARING WITNESS





**Martin Puryear** was born in Washington, D.C., in 1941 and currently lives in upstate New York. Puryear earned his BA in art from The Catholic University of America in 1963. From 1964 to 1966 he served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the West African nation of Sierra Leone, where he also learned about the local wood-working and basketry traditions. Puryear continued his studies at the Royal Swedish Academy of Art in Stockholm from 1966 to 1968, and the following year returned to the United States to attend graduate school at Yale University, where he earned his MFA in sculpture in 1971.

Puryear's work has been the focus of many museum exhibitions, beginning with a 1977 show at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Most recently, his work was featured in *Martin Puryear* (2008-09), a major retrospective exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which also traveled to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Puryear's work has also been shown in many group exhibitions, including the 1979, 1981, and 1989 Biennial Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; the Twentieth International São Paulo Bienal (1989) in Brazil, where Puryear represented the United States and was awarded the grand prize for best artist; and *Documenta IX* (1992) in Kassel, Germany.

Puryear's many awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-78), the Guggenheim Foundation (1983), and the MacArthur Foundation (1989). Among his other public commissions are *North Cove Pylons* (1994) for Battery Park City in New York and *That Profile* (1999) for the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

MEDIUM BRONZE  
DIMENSIONS 40 FT TALL

