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At Storm King, 2 New Works Faced a Challenging Birth
The pandemic complicated production of Sarah Sze's outdoor sculpture and influenced her indoor multimedia installation.

Laura van Straaten



Sarah Sze's new sculpture, "Fallen Sky," commissioned by the Storm King Art Center, will be unveiled to the public on June 12. © Lila Barth for The New York Times

Sarah Sze is a globally renowned artist who has represented the United States at the Venice Biennale and whose work is displayed in permanent collections at some of the world's greatest museums.

But the story of how her newest and perhaps most prestigious commission came to be is a tale of resiliency rooted in a historically rural region of Orange County, N.Y., about 70 miles north of Manhattan.

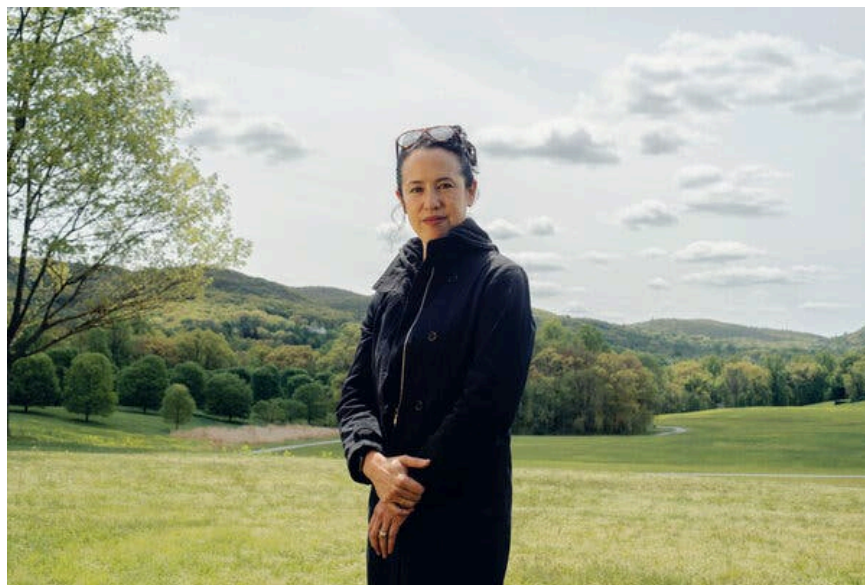
The county is home to both the Storm King Art Center, which commissioned Ms. Sze before the trials of 2020 stretched the nonprofit outdoor museum thin, and the art foundry where her commission was crafted by 75 men and women who faced an outbreak of Covid-19 in their workplace earlier this year.

When Ms. Sze's circular, stainless steel sculpture is unveiled to the public June 12, it will be the first major, permanent, site-specific commission for the influential 500-acre art park since Maya Lin's 11-acre earthwork project "Wave Field" premiered in 2009.

With "Fallen Sky," as the new sculpture is titled, Ms. Sze, 52, will become the first of her generation and the third woman among 11 artists so represented. Also debuting that same day, through Nov. 8, will be a new multimedia installation, titled "Fifth Season" that Ms. Sze created specifically for the adjacent indoor exhibition space as a counterpoint.

"The relationship of the human to landscape is this age-old exploration of artists," Ms. Sze said, "but both works I've made are much more about how the landscape is fragile, it's in flux, and our relationship to it is fractured."

"I think this has to do with our generation," she added, "Our relationship to landscape is not one of owning it."



Ms. Sze is a 2003 MacArthur fellow and a tenured professor at Columbia University. "The relationship of the human to landscape is this age-old exploration of artists," she said. © Lila Barth for The New York Times

The story of Ms. Sze's new exhibition begins in 2014, when Nora Lawrence, now senior curator at Storm King, and a longtime admirer of Ms. Sze's work, met her at a gallery dinner and began courting her by email.

"It was a slow burn," Ms. Sze said, laughing during one of several interviews and visits over the winter, both upstate and at her studio in Manhattan's garment district.

It took nearly three years for Ms. Sze (pronounced ZEE), a 2003 MacArthur fellow and a tenured professor at Columbia University, to choose a site at Storm King and design a project. She

ultimately found inspiration in a grassy 36-foot divot, where the root base of a large tree had once been.

“What was most important for me is this idea of negative space and positive space,” she said, “And how they generate one another.”



Ms. Sze's "Fallen Sky" still being installed at Storm King. © Lila Barth for The New York Times. A rendering of the final design for "Fallen Sky." © Sarah Sze Studio

Storm King announced the commission in 2018 for the spring of 2020. But production of the new work was already falling behind when the pandemic struck. Postponement to 2021 was inevitable.

Like many arts organizations, Storm King took a big hit because of Covid-19. The museum lost more than 40 percent of its ticket revenue in 2020 and had to cancel its two main annual fundraisers. But it rallied, even extending its hours to meet the rising demand from nature-, travel- and art-hungry people throughout the Northeast.

By spring of 2020, work on “Fallen Sky” had evolved from sketches to handmade clay models and digital imaginings. Ms. Sze was ready for a foundry, which artists use to create artworks in metal that are too big, complex or dangerous to attempt in their own studios.

Of the half dozen foundries around the world that submitted proposals, Ms. Lawrence said, one of the best was from UAP (formerly Polich Tallix), a storied facility just 20 minutes from Storm King in the town of Rock Tavern, N.Y.

But UAP had its first confirmed case of Covid-19 in March of 2020, and the company, like all businesses deemed nonessential, was shut down for several months.



Ms. Sze, left, and the senior curator Nora Lawrence at Storm King. © Lila Barth for The New York Times

The foundry reopened last summer and was awarded Ms. Sze’s project in July. Aside from the prestige, the commission provided an opportunity for the 100 or so employees to work on a project they could easily visit with their families and to help revitalize the company “in a time of stress because of so much insecurity and anxiety,” said Emily Johnson, who oversees projects and design for UAP.

The value of that invigoration was not lost on the Storm King team, even as it was going through its own challenges. “Supporting local community and businesses,” Ms. Lawrence said, “was on Storm King’s mind too.”

Then came the winter holidays. By New Year’s the virus had taken hold anew among foundry employees. In some instances, “people fell ill at work,” Ms. Johnson recalled, “we also had positive asymptomatic cases.”

“At that point we sent everyone home,” she said.

Once again, the 100,000-square-foot foundry sat dark, its machinery cold and quiet until employees could show a negative Covid-19 test. Production of “Fallen Sky” resumed later in January.



Workers at the UAP foundry, clad in aluminate Kevlar spats, aprons, chaps and gaiters, pour molten metal for Ms. Sze's sculpture. © Chris Roque/UAP, via Sarah Sze Studio

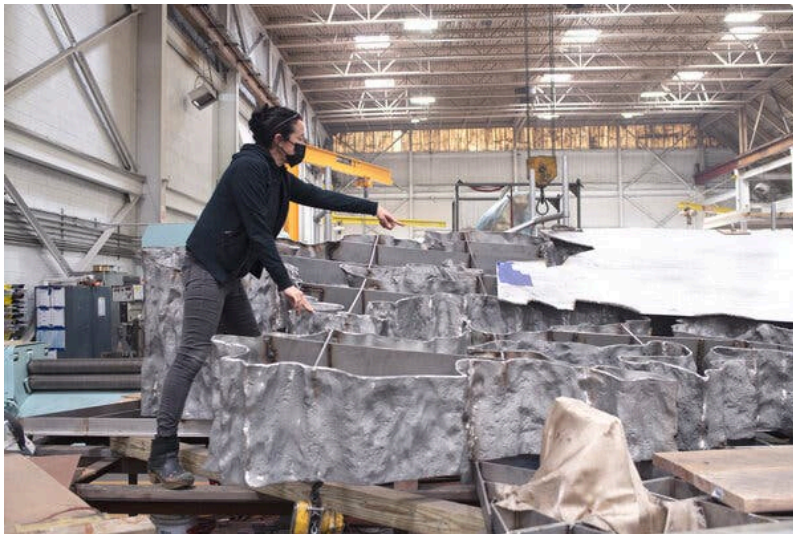
During a visit to the foundry in March, Ms. Sze was clad completely in black; she scuffed about happily in her dirt-encrusted clog-boots among a warren of work spaces all jiggled and tooled for metal-making, dodging sparks to greet a welder working on the maze of underground armature for “Fallen Sky.”

Later in the afternoon, at the back of the stadium-sized facility, she watched Dave Rollins, Esteban Flores Trinidad, Vicente Cardoso and Eddie Sanchez approach an oven where steel ingots had been melted to nearly 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

The men — kitted out like the Tin Man in aluminate Kevlar spats, aprons, chaps and gaiters — poured the glowing liquid metal into two preheated crucibles, which they transported with care the few steps toward the sand molds. (The molds for “Fallen Sky” were made by compressing sand around Ms. Sze’s 130 handmade clay sculptures.)

Then, Mr. Sanchez — wielding a broom-sized thermometer — gave his signal and the team poured the metal into the artist’s molds. There was an audible splash and the steel spattered off the foundry floor as little metal balls.

In a far corner of the foundry, Ms. Sze examined the results of an earlier pour. Most of the coarse pink sand had been hammered away to reveal the metal sculpture inside, still warm to the touch a day later. Each of the original 130 steel pieces that make up the visible parts of “Fallen Sky” would be made like this, then polished and finished under the artist’s watchful eye.



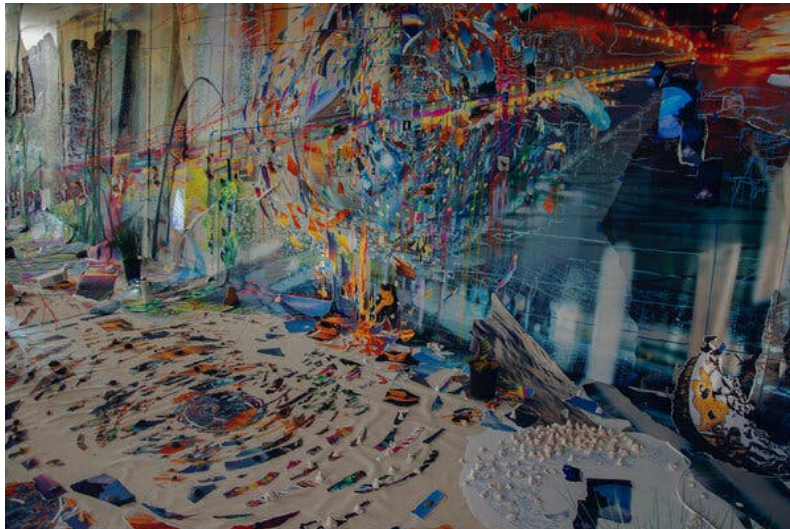
Ms. Sze at the UAP foundry with the steel armature and several of the 130 pieces of polished stainless steel that make up “Fallen Sky.” © Sarah Sze Studio

That same week, 10 miles away in Mountainville, Ms. Sze tramped along one of Storm King’s icy lawns in a silver down jacket, as shiny as her own sculpture. She surveyed the pilings where its armature would soon go, between Calder’s “The Arch” and Louise Nevelson’s “City on the High Mountain.”

Ms. Sze said she hopes “Fallen Sky,” a reflective, low-slung circle of organic shapes not unlike the crusts of snow dotting the land around it well into spring, will achieve the feeling of being “caught between being monumental and entropic,” she said, “the earth taking it over versus it rising out of the earth.”

Because of its long gestation period, fans of Ms. Sze may see connections among “Fallen Sky” and artworks she’s unveiled in the intervening years, notably the installation “Shorter Than the Day,” which she completed for La Guardia Airport last June, or her “Blueprint for a Landscape,” which has spanned the 96th Street station of the Second Avenue subway in Manhattan since 2017.

So, too, with “Fifth Season,” the interior artwork, even though she began it just as the world was shutting down last year. Her project for the interior “was entirely reconfigured in the context of the pandemic,” which, if it has highlighted anything, it’s — almost excruciatingly — the line between indoors and outdoors.

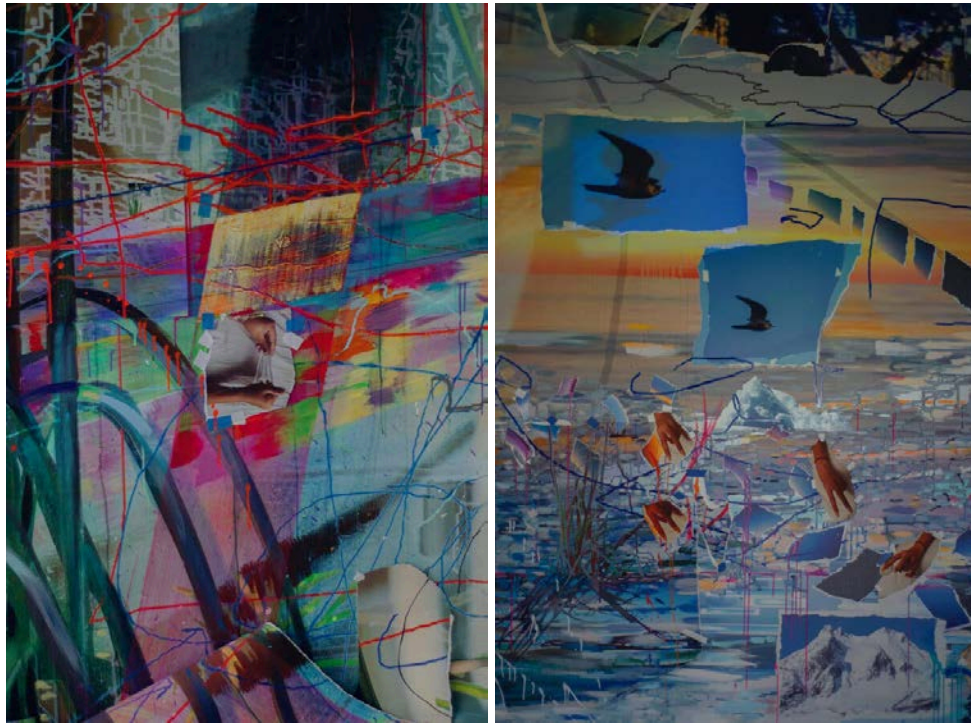


“Fifth Season,” Ms. Sze said, tries to blur the line between indoors and outdoors. © Lila Barth for The New York Times

That line, which has turned all of us into armchair experts on airflow, is precisely what Ms. Sze wanted to smudge in “Fifth Season.” She turned the interior exhibition space into “a promenade” that functions like “an allée, pulling the outside in,” so that “there is no exterior or interior: there is a blur.”

To do this, she made a 50-foot immersive, floor-to-ceiling, multimedia assemblage that functions as panorama along the longest wall, filling one’s field of vision yet shifting second-to-second like an old fashioned cranky (precursors to the modern movie) as you move through it. Her colossus of painting, collage, clay, video, sound, photos and bits of artistic detritus spills through the building’s French doors toward the wide expanse of Storm King’s great lawns.

“The pandemic is this massive experiment,” she said, “especially in “how to navigate time, space, memory, relationships.” The new installation reflects the churn and the impact of that.



A detail of "Fifth Season." © Lila Barth for The New York Times. Lila Barth for The New York Times

And "Fifth Season," though not a narrative work, hints at more personal considerations swirling around Ms. Sze during the pandemic too; her family is Asian-American (her father was born in China) and among the few figurative images here, Ms. Sze has depicted her own hands alongside those of her family, including her Indian-born husband, Siddhartha Mukherjee, an oncologist and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer on science and medicine, and their children.

As Ms. Lawrence put it, "There were so many things that felt like they could have gone either way in 2020." When Ms. Sze reveals her new works to the world, Ms. Lawrence hopes it will be "a moment of renewal" for all the locals who helped bring Ms. Sze's vision to life, as much as it is for the art and nature lovers expected to flock here this summer again.