



President and Mrs. Obama unveil their first commissioned portrait by Njideka Akunyili Crosby in the Hope and Change Lobby of The Obama Presidential Center Museum in Chicago, IL, on June 14, 2026.

Photo: courtesy of the Obama Presidential Center.

THE STORIES BEHIND THE OBAMA PRESIDENTIAL CENTER'S MAJOR NEW ARTWORKS

By Vittoria Benzine
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Five years after ground broke on the [Obama Presidential Center](#) (OPC), the 19.3-acre campus on Chicago's South Side is finally open. Inside, visitors will find a museum, library, basketball court, performing arts center—and a whole lot of art.

Threaded throughout the center—designed by **Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects** in partnership with **Interactive Design Architects**—is a raft of new site-specific [artist commissions](#) by 30 creators including **Mark Bradford**, **Jenny Holzer**, **Jeffrey Gibson**, and **Julie Mehretu**. Just this past week, the venue revealed the [first official portrait](#) of **Barack Obama** and **Michelle Obama**, by the superstar Nigerian-American painter [Njideka Akunyili Crosby](#).

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“By providing the community with a new level of access and exposure to all forms of art and culture, Mrs. Obama ensured that the center would be the most welcoming and accessible space/place for the arts on the South Side of Chicago,” OPC’s curator of art commissions **Virginia Shore** stated via email.

With the commissions freshly installed, I caught up with half a dozen of the participating artists to learn how they rose to the occasion of commemorating America’s first Black President and First lady.

Jack Pierson, *HOPE*



HOPE by Jack Pierson at The Obama Presidential Center Museum in Chicago, IL, on Wednesday, April 8, 2026.
Photo: courtesy of The Obama Foundation.

New York-based photographer **Jack Pierson** started making his signature Word Collages in 1991. He’s produced at least one such artwork reading “Hope” previously. Of course, the word also made a clear fit for Pierson’s opportunity to adorn a prominent corridor leading into the center’s museum. These four letters [defined a moment](#).

“I tried a few other things because I didn’t want to just go right to the easiest choice,” Pierson told me on a video call. Alas, his other ideas for words, like “Amen,” didn’t yield quite the same impact. Besides, hope has only become more important over the past decade, considering the state of the world. “I wouldn’t say it’s all we have left,” he said, “but it’s one of the things we have left.”

Three-quarters of the letters here emerge from the repository of vintage signage that Pierson has steadily amassed over the past 30 years. This trove has only grown more precious as signs in general become increasingly

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digital. You'll notice that the "O" in this rendition of "hope" is quite large—a nice shoutout to the Obamas. The "P," however, was an ornate treasure Pierson scored on a recent road trip down South.

María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Still Holding the Scent of Flowers*



Still Holding the Scent of Flowers by María Magdalena Campos-Pons at The Obama Presidential Center Museum in Chicago, IL, on Friday, May 8, 2026. Photo: courtesy of The Obama Foundation.

The OPC museum explores the Obamas' lives, the Obama campaign and presidency, and democracy at large. Before the full-sized replica of President Obama's Oval Office stands Cuban-American artist **María Magdalena Campos-Pons's** luscious mixed-media floral mural.

"My first surprise was how humanly sized the **White House** is," Campos-Pons recounted on a call regarding a private group visit she did while Obama was in office. There, she saw the Rose Garden and took a natural interest. Flowers often figure into her explorations of memory.

Campos-Pons considers this commission a continuation of her 2021 **Galerie Barbara Thumm** [exhibition](#) for [Breonna Taylor](#). The show's beauty could almost be called defiant. *Still Holding the Scent of Flowers* can be read similarly. Campos-Pons based the work on research into the 113-year history of the Rose Garden, which was [recently leveled](#) by the new administration.

"I wanted to do something that was like a firework in the sky, but instead of being fireworks, was petals from flowers," she said. A rich bevy of patriotically diverse blooms appear. Southern Magnolias honor the White

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House as portal to America's South. Carrots and broccoli pay tribute to Michelle Obama's vegetable garden. As Campos-Pons's neighbor observed upon seeing it in her studio, you do smell the flowers.

Jules Julien, *All Together*



All Together by Jules Julien at the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago, IL. Photo: courtesy of The Obama Presidential Center.

The final artwork the OPC museum's visitors will see is *All Together*, an interactive digital mural by **Jules Julien**, one of only two non-Americans the center commissioned. It's the second, much larger of two murals the French illustrator made for the museum. On a call, Julien characterized the commission as harboring "tons of responsibility, to be honest," and joked that his offering "is not the **Statue of Liberty**, but still." The work was two-and-a-half years in the making.

Indeed, the room's sweeping screen displays Julien's most complex, colorful work yet—a 17-minute pixelated animation of pictograms summarizing 11 tenets that the museum's various exhibitions touch upon, including education, peace, and inclusivity. "It's not about President Obama," Julien said of the themes. "It's about citizens in America but also citizens throughout the world, because the themes are not really linked to America."

On five interactive screens, guests can spot a cause they care about and enter their name, which will subsequently appear as one pixel amid the much larger artwork. This gesture can be primally motivating. "You call your friends by name, you call your family by name, you call your neighbor by name, so names are really powerful," Julien noted.

Jay Heikes, *Quintessence*

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Quintessence by Jay Heikes in Courtyard 1 at the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago, IL on Tuesday, May 26, 2026. Photo: courtesy of The Obama Foundation.

Six seven-pointed stars by Minneapolis-based sculptor **Jay Heikes** watch over guests in one museum courtyard. These charming, lopsided creations are the latest evolution in a series Heikes initiated for his [Marianne Boesky](#) show in 2013.

Those works, however, were made to live indoors. Some featured wax. Heikes's latest efforts bringing *Quintessence* outside cap a decade spent trying to mix sturdy bronze with an airier component, like quartz, or in this instance, glass.

"I've been really dedicated to alchemy, trying to combine materials that are not so combinable," Heikes said over video call. "This was one that gave me fits for about a decade, because I couldn't find the right material to accept the bronze at 2200 degrees." Quartz has so much water in it that it popped violently. Glass also pops, just less.

Heikes realized the sculptures needed to come from a single pour. Welding would also jeopardize the glass. He's discovered the ideal temperatures to submerge chunks of glass within the bronze, and the ideal method: "open faced sand casting," Heikes said. "A lot of places won't do it, but my guys would."

The results justify his efforts. The stars are extraterrestrial, iridescent, and, symbolically speaking, inspiring.

Aliza Nisenbaum, *Reading Circles, Weaving Dreams, Seeding Futures*

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Reading Circles/Weaving Dreams/Seeding Futures by Aliza Nisenbaum in the Chicago Public Library at The Obama Presidential Center in Chicago, IL, on Friday, May 8, 2026. Photo: courtesy of The Obama Foundation.

The OPC's library, meanwhile, is the latest addition to the **Chicago Public Library** system. A characteristically colorful mural by Queens-based painter **Aliza Nisenbaum** watches over its main reading room. At 70 feet-long, this is Nisenbaum's largest mural yet. "It's a very different type of work," she said on a video call. Her portraits often include elements of social practice in terms of [the relationships she builds](#) with sitters. Some figures here hail from that archive, "coming together in an imagined collective," she said. Others are famous writers. Nisenbaum appears twice.

Details abound, informed by Nisenbaum's formative years at the **School of the Art Institute of Chicago** and visits to the city's libraries. The kente textiles of **Barack Obama Sr.**'s native Kenya appear. So do flowers from Mexico, Nisenbaum's homeland. Perhaps most interestingly, she has equated the stages of learning with the times of day, progressing from left to right.

"I was thinking of seeds, and how President Obama would talk about dreams," she said. "Things are planted, then we come together and we discuss ideas, and through a synthesis, we come up with new ideas together, and then we go into our own dreams and our own personal individual space."

Maya Lin, *Seeing Through the Universe*

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Maya Lin, *Seeing Through the Universe* in the Ann Dunham Water Terrace at The Obama Presidential Center in Chicago, IL on June 13, 2026. Photo courtesy of The Obama Foundation.

Since bursting on the scene in 1981, New York-based architect and artist **Maya Lin**'s monumental, [oftentimes immersive](#) installations have toed the line between her chosen modalities. She's an avid environmentalist who often explores water—a perfect choice for the OPC's Water Terrace, dedicated to Barack Obama's mother.

Seeing Through the Universe advances Lin's water table series, which started 37 years ago with her black granite **Civil Rights Memorial** in Alabama. "These pieces are all about how water finds its way to the surface," Lin told me via video call. Her latest endeavor particularly honors the Obamas because it consists of "a matched pair"—two 19,800-pound hunks of Silver Cloud granite from Georgia. These lozenge-shaped pieces simultaneously reference the cosmological motif of ellipses and **Anish Kapoor**'s iconic *Cloud Gate* (2006) in **Millennium Park**, eight miles north.

The stones' composition—one laying flat, the other standing like a portal—also allows Lin to utilize water's varied states. Liquid gushes from the flat stone, and the void of the standing one mists. "I'm also thinking this one will be a very playful piece," she noted. "It invites young children to come up to it, to cool off in it, to play a little."