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By Ted Loos

How an Artist Is Transforming the Guggenheim Museum— Down to the Freight Elevator Hallway

The acclaimed installation maestro Sarah Sze is staging a major exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum that asks questions like “Is that a work of art?”



“The most ephemeral thing in my work is the technology,” says artist Sarah Sze in her Manhattan studio. “Paper has been around for centuries, [but] your iPhone will be useless in a year.”. Photography by Gioncarlo Valentine for WSJ. Magazine

It’s telling that artist Sarah Sze’s cellphone ringtone is the famous five-note tune from the 1977 sci-fi classic *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which was used in the movie to communicate with an alien spaceship. “We are so fully immersed in it,” Sze says of technology, one of her great subjects. “We’re in the eye of the storm.”

In her Hell’s Kitchen studio in Manhattan this past December, Sze—known for her sprawling multimedia assemblages—works amid what seems like a tornado of artistic materials. But the chaos is carefully controlled.

The artist and her small staff have turned several of the studio's rooms into life-size mock-ups of the unusual spaces of New York City's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, where her show Sarah Sze: Timelapse goes on view at the end of March.

Some of the curving walls and angled planes of Frank Lloyd Wright's famously brilliant but challenging corkscrew are replicated with white foam core in the studio; part of the space is where Sze once lived by herself as a young artist in the 1990s. There are two water tanks so she can practice how to activate the watery works in the show.

"I want the weirdest building I can get," says Sze, 54, a MacArthur fellowship "genius grant" winner who relishes the role of intellectual provocateur as well as playful trickster. "I love the idea of bringing someone in and disorienting them and reorienting them."

Her quest with this exhibition is to make her densely layered works truly site-specific. "I wanted to make pieces you could only do at the Guggenheim," says Sze. "The building became a tool for making the work." In part because of the Covid shutdown, the museum allowed her to do practice installations of her works on days the museum was closed, giving her more time than usual to prepare.

"She's the most thorough person I know," says her husband, the cancer physician and author Siddhartha Mukherjee, who won the Pulitzer Prize for 2010's *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*.

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Dressed in black layers topped by a black puffer vest, Sze is speaking quickly and excitedly about what animates her. Descartes, Bach and Emily Dickinson come up as casual reference points. It is no surprise to learn, later in the conversation, that she sometimes listens to books on tape at twice the normal speed.

"The most ephemeral thing in my work is the technology," she says, looking at a projector on the floor. "Paper has been around for centuries, [but] your iPhone will be useless in a year."

One of the in-progress Guggenheim works looks like a huge swirling collage hanging over a similar collage lying at an angle that literally spills onto the floor. It turns out to be a trompe l'oeil effect: The top part is a painting, and the bottom part is a torn-paper work, made after she printed out a photo collage and then painstakingly ripped the pieces over the course of three days. Sze is constantly blurring traditional media categories. "My favorite question is, 'Is that a work of art?'" she says. "For me it's about challenging the definitions."

Upon closer inspection, the content of this work is surprisingly personal. A photograph of one of her two daughters asleep is among the images featured, and the entire thing centers on an image of what looks like a fiery cauldron, which turns out to be a photograph of a pot that she mistakenly set ablaze while making popcorn. The mayhem of family life has been transformed into art.



A work in progress.

“In our visually fragmented world, she’s insisting on a synthesis,” says Richard Armstrong, the Guggenheim’s outgoing director. “She makes it both beautiful and poetic.”

Sze plans to project video of the cycles of the moon on the outside of the Guggenheim at night and turn the interior walls of the spiral ramp into a screen for what she calls a “river of images.” A fan will move a weighted pendulum—essentially a plumb bob used for measuring—on a wire that will “tickle” the surface of the oft-overlooked small pool of water at the base of the museum’s rotunda. Even a forgotten area by a freight elevator will host 1998’s *Untitled* (Media Lab, Casino Luxembourg), a small video installation on a dolly.

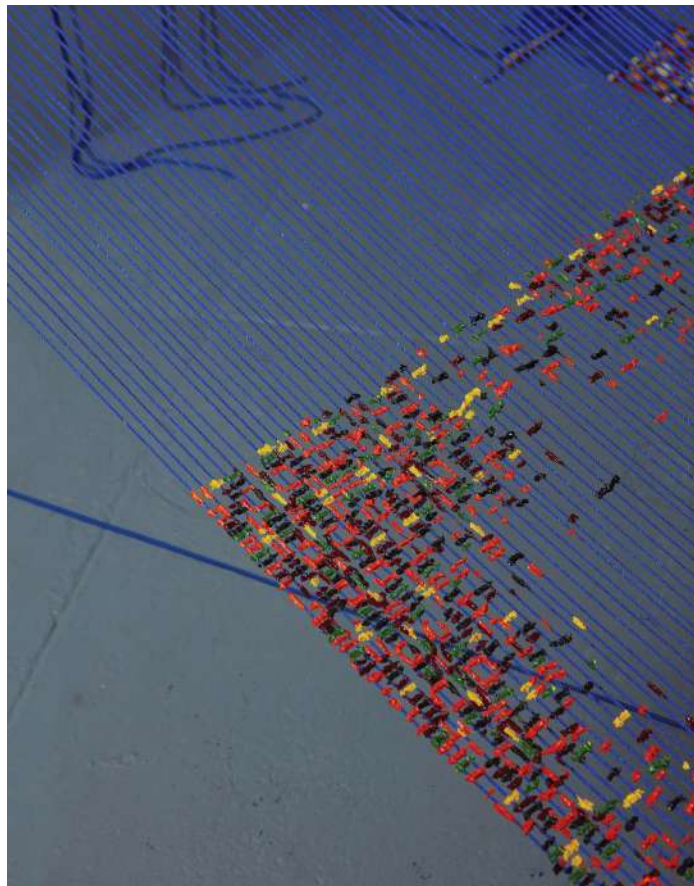
The surprise element of those placements, and the time it takes for viewers to absorb what they are seeing, is part of the point. “When you don’t expect something, it burns in your memory,” says Sze. “You remember the moments that are not planned.”

Untitled (Media Lab, Casino Luxembourg) is one of just two extant works, along with *Timekeeper* (2016), which caps the exhibition atop the museum’s Tower galleries. The immersive *Timekeeper*, to be shown in

darkness, is an eye-popping jumble of whirring objects, notably clocks. Videos project onto torn pieces of paper, and the work features items taken from Sze's own desk, all connected by a thin metal armature.

Sze's best-known work, the multipart sculpture Triple Point (Pendulum), sprawled all over the United States Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. Her immersive assemblage—thousands of items including rocks, water bottles, paint cans, tree branches, photographs and sponges—took over the courtyard in front of the neoclassical building and climbed up the exterior, too, further amplifying its themes in the indoor gallery spaces. Although the elements were identifiable, they blurred together in the mind of the viewer in service of the overall kaleidoscopic effect. Despite such bravura and scope, she rejects the idea that artistic impact comes from size. "It's never scale for the sake of scale," she says.

Kyung An, the Guggenheim curator organizing Sze's show, points to the slender pendulum work as indicative of Sze's approach. "Some people try to fill our space or transform it," says An. "But with the simplest of gestures—a tool used for measuring—she makes you look at where you are."



A work in progress.

Two recent New York City-area projects demonstrate Sze's ability to succeed outside of the museum context. In 2020 came Shorter Than the Day at LaGuardia Airport's Terminal B, commissioned by the Public Art Fund and LaGuardia Gateway Partners. The huge circular matrix of metal rods was part of the facility's splashy renovation, and to install it during the early pandemic, Sze was declared an essential worker, donning a hazmat suit in the process. In 2021, she debuted Fallen Sky, a groundwork made up of fragmented pieces of reflective, polished stainless steel, at Storm King Art Center in New York's Hudson Valley.

Sze's work is prized by top collectors including Agnes Gund, the longtime patron and president emeritus of the Museum of Modern Art. Gund was one of the major donors who contributed to the purchase of Triple Point (Pendulum) after its Venice run as a donation to MoMA; she bought another work, Plywood Sunset Leaning (2015), as a gift to the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Gund says that Sze's penchant for turning chaos into coherence beguiles her, although Sze's creations are not always easy to collect. "It's often in a big format," Gund says. "You have to be serious about buying it."

One work on paper that she owns, Notepad, a 2008 three-dimensional lithograph on laser engraved paper, intentionally spills downward from the wall. "You may step on something," warns Gund. She also owns a piece that is easier to display—a 2019 painting called Double Vision, which has a similar flaming image as the piece on view at the Guggenheim—and hangs in the entrance hall of her Manhattan home.

"Sarah has made some ephemeral and difficult-to-collect work," says the New York art adviser Lisa Schiff of SFA Advisory. As a result, Schiff adds, "Very little of her work gets to auction." The artist's top lot at auction was 2020's painted triptych Surprise Ending, which sold for \$737,500 at Christie's New York the same year it was made.

Sze's domestically scaled paintings, like Double Vision, which she has been doing all along, remain somewhat under the radar. Sze says that, as opposed to her highly collaborative sculptures, she relishes something she can make totally alone in the studio. If buyers discover those works—which are not her most famous, but are a lot easier to show at home—it could be a boon for her market, says Schiff. "It allows collectors to participate more," Schiff adds.



Sze at work on pieces destined for the Guggenheim show. She has always been self-directed: When, in the 2000s, she decided her gallery representation wasn't the right fit, she moved on. "I didn't have anywhere else to go, and everyone said, 'You're crazy,' " she says.

Sze was born and raised in Boston. Her mother was a preschool teacher and her father an architect. His profession was hugely influential on her. "Our whole house was filled with architecture," she says. "He did low-income housing, and he had an office at home. His work was everywhere."

"I was drawing and making things constantly, nonstop," she says of her childhood (she has an older brother, David). "It was a super-creative environment. My parents encouraged originality, not just skill."

As an undergraduate at Yale, Sze studied architecture at first and then switched to painting; she finds it natural to have combined those two disciplines in her later career as an installation artist. "When I came to sculpture," she says, "it was painting plus architecture."

After college, she spent a year in Japan, then returned to Boston to co-found New England Citybridge (now Breakthrough Collaborative), a nonprofit education program for middle-schoolers. But she continued painting on the side. "I was addicted to art," she says. She moved to New York in 1995 to pursue an M.F.A. at Manhattan's School of Visual Arts.

While she was finishing up that degree in 1997, she was invited to participate in her first gallery show, at Casey Kaplan, an exhibition curated by established artists Laurie Simmons and Cindy Sherman.

That exposure helped get Sze several offers of gallery representation, normally the holy grail for any young artist—but Sze said no thanks. "I wanted to slow it down," she says.

Instead of signing onto a commercial gallery, she made a complex installation for the nonprofit space White Columns. "I basically lived in the gallery to make it," she says of the 1997 work *White Room*, an immersive, object-filled warren.

As a professor of studio art herself at Columbia, she now counsels her students to have the same confidence in their work. "For a younger artist, there can be too much run, run, run," says Sze. "The work is what matters."



A work in progress.

When, in the 2000s, she found that her gallery representation wasn't the right fit, she decided to move on. "I didn't have anywhere else to go, and everyone said, 'You're crazy,'" she recalls. Perhaps fittingly for an artist known for putting together disparate elements, she now works with three very different galleries simultaneously: Gagosian, Victoria Miro and Tanya Bonkadar Gallery.

Sze's close friend, the painter Julie Mehretu, herself a MacArthur fellow, says, "There's zero complacency.... She's always been the same person, despite getting recognition very young."

Sze's daughters are 13 and 17, and the family lives in Chelsea.

"[Sarah and Siddhartha] are both very calm people," says the writer Amy Waldman, a friend of Sze's whom she first met at Yale. "One of her daughters gave her a toast at a birthday party that went, 'I remember the one time my mom got upset, when the school bus left without me.' I was thinking, the one time?"

The lockdown part of the pandemic was very productive for Sze. "Sarah made an incredible body of work during the pandemic," says Mukherjee. "It speaks to her sense of discipline."

Sze has a way of plowing even the most mundane things into the work itself (and somehow, she and her staff manage to fit the many pieces that make up her art into Sze's multiroom studio). A bag of Post-it Notes in her studio was, at one point, a way to help her organize her archive. But she liked how they looked and started incorporating them as collage elements in works. "I use them as color," she says. It's a move that harkens back to the way one of her favorite artists, Jasper Johns, transformed everyday objects into something uncanny, as in his 1960 Painted Bronze—a brush-filled coffee can as domestic monument.

The very word timelapse in her Guggenheim show title, is indicative of one of her aspirations, that her works be in dialogue with the entire sweep of art history.

When someone is standing next to an ancient work, Sze says, "You're talking to other human beings, having a direct conversation, over time, with humanity. Art is the greatest time traveler."

Corrections & Amplifications

A video installation by Sarah Sze is called *Untitled (Media Lab, Casino Luxembourg)*, and another of her installations, *Timekeeper*, was completed in 2016. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said that the title was *Media Lab*, and that *Timekeeper* was completed in 2015. (Corrected on Feb. 2)