

French artist explains origin of Nyanza-based Jardin de la Mémoire

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Bruce Clarke, a French visual artist who worked as an artistic advisor during the construction of the space, speaks at the inauguration of the garden on Sunday. Dan Nsengiyumva

“Jardin de la Mémoire” (Garden of Memory), a space built at Nyanza Genocide Memorial in Kicukiro District, to symbolically depict what happened during the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi was officially opened on Sunday, September 11, by the First Lady Jeannette Kagame.

Speaking at the launch, Bruce Clarke, a French visual artist who worked as an artistic advisor during the construction of the space explained the background of the whole pro-

ject which he started thinking about after his first visit to the country in 1994.

“I visited Rwanda for the first time in late August 1994. That time as a photographer, mandated by several civil society associations in France and coordinated by the CRF (communauté rwandaise de France - Rwandan Community in France), to bring back photos - for exhibitions, for the press - of how people were living in Rwanda, surviving, in the country devastated by the genocide”, Clarke said.

He said that it was of utmost importance to show the world and to talk about the aftermath of genocide in Rwanda, the trauma and suffering of the people, the extreme material precariousness of the country.

“At that time in Europe, the majority of photos being published were those taken in the refugee camps in Zaïre (now DR Congo) and Tanzania - photos which, objectively speaking, were transforming the killers and their families into the victims”, Clarke said.

“The real victims in Rwanda were often absent from the picture. And what this meant, is that the rewriting of history and genocide denial were already underway”, he added.



A monument of upright men in the garden is a symbol of the resilience of Genocide survivors who decided to move forward and move on with life.

Clarke said that in two to three years after his first visit, he started asking himself what role art could play in a memorial process, but the challenge presented to him was : what artistic form could a memorial take?

“To propose a painting or a sculpture in a public space would be derisory – faced with the enormity of what had happened – this work of art had to be huge, all embracing and built collectively – to give it meaning”, Clarke noted.

Initially, the intention became to pose one million stones – a symbolic number of the victims of the Genocide.

The stones would be posed in commemorative ceremonies by survivors and family members of victims in an individual act of remembrance could come and participate.

Clarke’s role as a visual artist would be limited to giving artistic form to the posed stones. *“It was a cathartic ritual opening, ho-*



A view of the amphitheatre to host Kwibuka events. It has the capacity to host more than 3500 people sitting.

pefully, the beginnings of a mourning process. Stone represents the permanence of memory. It is resilience. Stone is for eternity”, he noted.

But over the years, the original concept was modified, even in 2002 when the first stone of the now ‘Jardin de la Mémoire’ was posed by the First Lady.

The ‘Upright Men feature’

Before 2014 when Rwanda would commemorate the Genocide for the 20th time, Clarke met the late Jean de Dieu Mucyo who asked him if he couldn’t find some painted form to commemorate the Genocide *“20 years on”*.

Mucyo was at that time the Executive Secretary of the Commission for the Fight against the Genocide (CNLG) and later a Senator.

“It was a new challenge. As I’ve already said, no image or sculpture could render justice to the weight of genocide. However I took up the challenge. I asked myself : ‘What is Rwanda today 20 years after? How are the people individually and collectively doing?’”.

“My response was that they are standing tall, upright, dignified. The genocidal project-the annihilation and humiliation of a group of people - had failed since despite killing more than a million people, those who survived are unbowed and live with their dignity”, Clarke said.

He then proposed the ‘Upright Men’ (Abantu Bahagaze Bemye) which literally means people standing upright, something he describes as a way to tell the story of an unbowed community, so that they could become symbols affirming human dignity, personifying a community, the survivors, and participate in the writing of the history of the Genocide.

He has presented it in more than 25 exhibitions, in 15 countries so far, to tell the story.

Clarke noted that the project was built collectively with survivor organizations, Kicukiro District, with the moral support of the office of the First Lady and Imbuto Foundation.

He added that to him, a work of art is anything that gives beauty and provokes thought. *“Which isn’t passive, which takes sides. Which reinforces our common huma-*

nity”.



Sorghum garden Sorghum played a big role because a lot of Tutsis hid there and were able to survive, one of the reasons it is also depicted in the garden. Dan Nsengiyumva



Water and the marsh area that symbolise the tragic way that some tutsi went through in swamps ,marshland and in rivers during the Genocide against the Tutsi.