

## NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY HOSTS INAUGURAL GALA, TEMPERED BY TRAGEDY

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David Adjaye and Maya Lin.  
COURTESY THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

On Sunday night, Maya Lin was standing in the main hall of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., next to a sculpture of Maya Lin. It was not of her own design, nor did it look anything like her work. It was by a fellow artist, the Berlin-based Karin Sander, who uses 3-D inkjet printing to fabricate mini-models of men and women out of acrylonitrile butadiene styrene. It looks like a Maya Lin action figure. It's called *Maya Lin 1.5*.

"Dorothy Moss, the curator, said that they're always interested in new ways of portraiture," said Lin, who currently has an installation up at the newly renovated Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian that recreates the Chesapeake Bay using 168,000 marbles. "So they gave me a couple artists, and I said, there's a colleague I know who started with 3-D photographic imaging processes about 15, 20 years ago. And so I suggested Karin Sander. They loved it. For a sculptor to be represented three dimensionally—it was irresistible!"

Such is the conceit of the Portrait Gallery, where great American creative types and war heroes are portrayed by a complementary figure, or their equals and peers. It's sort of like a museum version of *Interview* magazine. And like most institutions, it has a black-tie benefit to go with it, though this is newer than most, as on Sunday the gallery hosted in its famed courtyard the inaugural American Portrait Gala. The party raised \$1.7 million for the institution, and drew to D.C. a starry lineup of honorees: Hank Aaron, Aretha Franklin, Cpl. Kyle Carpenter, Carolina Herrera, and Lin, all of whom now have their likenesses enshrined in the institution's halls.

For Lin, a return to D.C. is a homecoming of sorts, as she became a flashpoint for the culture wars in the '80s when—at the age of 21—she defeated thousands of other applicants to win the commission for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The black minimalist design was quite the controversy at the time, as it didn't have the same guys-heroically-pushing-up-a-flag quality that most war memorials in Washington trade in. Ross Perot, who funded the contest, called the design “something for New York intellectuals.” Also, the contest was administered name-blind, and so when it was revealed that the person who would be memorializing the lives lost in Vietnam was named “Lin,” reactionaries unleashed no small amount of venom. Perot, for instance, referred to her as an “egg roll.” While it is the capital of the free world, Washington's reactionary affectations still bleed through in surprising ways. But the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is by now considered a masterpiece, and a template for most other memorials constructed since.

“Let's face it,” Lin said. “My first trips to Washington—it was trial by fire, that first year. But now it's great. I always sneak over and visit it. It's special. And to have been able to help and communicate and touch people in that setting. I still get letters from veterans.”

Lin joined the procession of men in tuxedos and women in long gowns, passing by the Robert Mapplethorpe photo of Herrera that the Portrait Gallery chose as her entry (“I mean, this is *so chic*,” Lee Daniels, the film director and creator of the TV hit *Empire*, said to Herrera as they walked by) as a row of severe men in full military regalia with serious hardware pinned to their lapels stood silently nearby. They were there to honor fellow serviceman Cpl. Carpenter, the youngest living recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, who threw himself on a grenade in Afghanistan to save the lives of his fellow soldiers. The constant presence of men in uniform among the trustees in line for champagne was a reminder that this was a gala happening just days after the terrorist attacks that killed more than 120 people in Paris and more than 40 people in Beirut, as were the Secret Security agents lining the perimeter of the canopied dinner area, there to protect Attorneys General both current (Loretta Lynch) and former (Eric Holder) along with Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. There was an increased police presence by the basketball stadium that abuts the museum, in various subway stops, outside the lobby of the ritzy Willard Hotel, and inside the Amtrak portals at Union Station.

“The French Ambassador to the United States was supposed to attend, but he couldn't be here, understandably,” said Kim Sajet, the Portrait Gallery's director. Ambassador Gerard Araud was in fact supposed to host a private dinner for the honorees at his home, but he hosted a vigil instead.

“Let's have a moment of silence for the tragedies in Lebanon and France,” Sajet said, and then there was one.

This solemn thread ran through the rest of the ceremony, even as the honorees were treated to tributes delivered by the familiar voices of PBS stars Judy Woodruff and Gwen Ifill—who were the emcees because this was a gala in Washington, D.C., after all—and handed statuettes designed by local artist **Barton Rubenstein**. Lin was introduced by architect David Adjaye, who said that “time and again, her work has focused on the great movements of our time.”

And then, instead of the normal passing off of a statuette, the last honoree took the stage, sat at a piano and said she was playing a song dedicated to the weekend's horrible events. She told everyone to sing along. And then Aretha Franklin sang "Amazing Grace."

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