



Tony Matelli's *Sleepwalker* finds a permanent home in Dallas.
Photograph by Anthony Falcon

SLEEPING AROUND

By way of Wellesley College near Boston, to the High Line in New York City, Tony Matelli's *Sleepwalker* will now rest at a permanent home in Dallas.

The sculptor Tony Matelli has become known for his hyperreal and adroit renderings of objects, which are commonplace as well as beautiful (and often both at the same moment). His most infamous work *Sleepwalker* (2014) has now become part of Brett and Lester Levy Jr.'s collection, installed on the grounds of their Dallas home. Its debut on the Wellesley College campus inspired a group of students to author a petition requesting that the sculpture be moved inside the school's Davis Gallery, and when the school did not comply with their demands, the sculpture was later vandalized. Since then, the piece was subsequently placed on New York City's High Line where it appeared in a record number of humorous selfies. Rarely has a work of contemporary art crossed into the public consciousness and been so stunningly reviled and embraced.

Chris Byrne: Can you describe how you first conceived of *Sleepwalker* (2014)?

Tony Matelli: *Sleepwalker* was first conceived in 1997, and the first version of it was made back then.

CB: And what was involved to make the actual sculpture?

TM: I wanted to make a sculpture that captured the sense of ambivalence I had about my life at the time. I wanted to create something that felt like it was in two worlds. Something kind of out of place, lost, and vulnerable. A sleepwalking figure perfectly embodies these ideas.

BY CHRIS BYRNE

CB: Were there any overt art historical references you were consciously alluding to? *Sleepwalker* seems to playfully acknowledge the work of John De Andrea and Duane Hanson.

TM: I wouldn't say I was alluding to Duane Hanson as much as just simply working within that tradition. I just think of it as the best visual language for that piece.

CB: Was the sculpture made specifically for the exhibition *Tony Matelli: New Gravity* at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College?

TM: Yes, *Sleepwalker* (2014) was.

CB: At that time, you defended its location outside of the museum.

TM: After visiting the museum in preparation for my show I was really impressed with the campus landscape. It was designed by Olmsted, who also designed Central Park and has great open spaces. I wanted to activate that landscape somehow, so I thought it was a perfect opportunity to remake the *Sleepwalker* as an outdoor work. There is a large open space next to the museum, which is visible from the final room in the top floor galleries. I thought that would be a great place for the sculpture because you would be able to see it from inside the museum. This echoed the dualities in the work. I thought it was perfectly placed.

CB: It's clearly a very provocative and compelling image, but were you prepared for its polarizing reception in Massachusetts?

TM: I don't see it as provocative at all. It's literally a sculpture of a sleeping man; it is serene and even gentle. Startling because of its context perhaps, but not provocative. What I feel makes this work so compelling is that it's an empathy magnet. You feel for the sculpture and its circumstances and can even relate.

CB: According to the petition that appeared on Change.org, *Sleepwalker* was referred to as a "source of apprehension, fear, and

triggering thoughts regarding sexual assault for some members of our campus community."

TM: I believe what happened on that campus was a temporary abandonment of critical thinking and rationality.

CB: I thought your response, "What they see in the sculpture is not in the sculpture" was great—it seemed to turn Frank Stella's famous 1964 quote, "What you see, is what you see," on its head if you will.

TM: Yes, and things that were there, they couldn't see. The students over and over referred to him as being "naked," which was totally infuriating. He is not naked. Like I said, they were behaving more or less irrationally.

CB: In 2016, the work was installed on the High Line as part of the group show *Wanderlust*. *Artnet News'* article, *See the Most Bizarre Photos of Tony Matelli's High Line "Sleepwalker"* captured only the audience's candid, humorous interaction with the sculpture. Were you surprised by these seemingly conflicting reactions to the same piece?

TM: Not one bit.

CB: *Sleepwalker* has received extensive press, garnering international attention from both art and non-art media, i.e., BBC News, CNN, *The Telegraph*, among others. Is there any aspect of the work that you feel was misunderstood at the time, which you'd like to clarify now?

TM: I think the sheer volume of press sort of distorted the work. It made it seem much more sensational than it really is. This is not a vulgar or crude work. It is sensitive, it is sensitively made, and the press distorted that. Look at the piece in a long shot on that green campus lawn and tell me otherwise. I don't think so.

CB: Do you have plans to visit *Sleepwalker* at Brett and Lester's home in Dallas?

TM: I would love to! **P**



From Left: Tony Matelli, *Sleepwalker* (Wellesley view 5), 2014, epoxy, fiberglass, steel, acrylic, and urethane paint, 69 x 21 x 34 in.; (Wellesley view 4) © Tony Matelli, courtesy the artist and Marlborough Contemporary, New York and London. Photo: John Kennard; Tony Matelli, *Sleepwalker*, 2014. Part of *Wanderlust*, a High Line Commission. On view April 2016–March 2017. Photo by Timothy Schenck. Courtesy of Friends of the High Line.