

PAFA puts up Punch

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A giant rendering of the classic comic figure Punch juggling artifacts of contemporary life -- high heels, rolling pin, gloves, whisky flask -- graces facade of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Jan. 25, 2015. TOM GRALISH/Staff Photographer



GALLERY: PAFA puts up Punch

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After presiding over the historic entrance to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts for more than a year, the giant Day-Glo Gumby fashioned by artist KAWS came down Sunday.

And, in a swoop of angling construction cranes, a giant, if less gaudy, Punch was hoisted above Broad Street in its stead.

At night, the new work, which the academy commissioned from sculptor Robert Taplin of New Haven, Conn., will glow with light as it faces the Convention Center across Broad Street.

Taplin's 16-foot fiberglass-and-steel piece - *The Young Punch Juggling* - is a contemporary rendering of the classic character of Italian commedia dell'arte Pulcinella, or Punchinello in English. The 64-year-old artist has been exploring the emotional and satiric possibilities of Punch for many years, although most of his work is much smaller than the new piece and has been created for indoor exhibition.

In addition to *Punch Juggling*, the academy will also mount a Taplin exhibition in the Furness building, including two large-scale sculptures, *Punch Makes a Public Confession* and *Punch is Homeless*, as well as a selection of small-scale maquettes. The exhibition will run Feb. 13 to May 24.

According to Harry Philbrick, director of the academy's museum, KAWS and Taplin were selected for the facade sculpture program a few years ago, shortly after Philbrick's arrival from the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut in 2011.

Both artists had major shows at the Aldrich.

"I wanted to choose artists whose work I admired and respected, but also with whom I had worked before, who I was confident could meet the logistical and technical challenges," Philbrick said in an e-mail, describing the selection process for the facade sculpture program. "Our next artist, Alyson Shotz, has also shown at the Aldrich, and is represented here in Philadelphia by the Locks Gallery. After Alyson Shotz, we hope to work with a Philadelphia-based artist."

Philbrick said that the academy had not acquired work by either KAWS or Taplin and that funding for the Taplin show and commission did not come from the acquisitions fund, recently boosted by the controversial \$36 million sale of a painting by Edward Hopper.

"We have raised funds from a number of philanthropic supporters of contemporary art here in Philadelphia," Philbrick said. "The total cost of the Taplin exhibition, including the sculpture outside as well as the two large-scale and 11 small-scale sculptures installed inside, is approximately \$75,000."

Philbrick called the expense modest.

Taplin has exhibited throughout the country and has executed public commissions for Connecticut and the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and has written extensively on sculpture, most prominently for *Art in America*.

He has noted Punch's many manifestations in many places over many centuries.

"So Punch is continually up for revival," Taplin said. "Putting a

rococo figure on a 19th-century Gothic Revival building in an ecclesiastical style - which is actually an art school - is the kind of total cultural and historical confusion that Punch is entirely comfortable with. He is nothing if not adaptable."

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