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## UH's public art program angles for something new with 'Mobius Houston'

**Molly Glentzer**

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Artist Marta Chilindrón holds a maquette of “Mobius Houston” as the new monumental sculpture is installed behind her at Wilhelmina’s Grove on the Univ. of Houston central campus.

Photo: Melissa Phillip, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Daylight dances this fall in mosaics of turquoise, yellow and fuchsia around the center of Wilhelmina’s Grove at the University of Houston’s central campus, a continuously evolving show from a sculpture that calls to mind a flock of giant butterflies resting on the ground.

Marta Chilindrón’s “Mobius Houston” actually represents a mathematical concept of infinity — an idea that’s appropriate for an institution of higher learning, especially one as involved in the sciences as UH.

“The concept of the mobius covers everything that we don’t know — space, knowledge, the universe,” said Chilindrón, a native of Argentina who lives in New York.

Interactive, geometrically based acrylic works with hinged elements that can be rearranged are her specialty, but she normally works at a much smaller scale. The largest of several previous “Mobius” pieces she has made is an indoor sculpture about 36 inches tall. It actually mimics a Möbius strip — a flexible, rectangular form that can be connected end to end to create a loop. The Houston piece, she said, is by necessity a kind of triple Möbius strip.

Chilindrón was relieved but still a little nervous a few weeks ago as a crew of a half-dozen people installed the monumental sculpture, commissioned by UH as the first work of its new temporary public art program.

Only the display of “Mobius Houston” is temporary; the piece is designed to be relocated every six months and shared by UH’s five regional campuses, which stretch from Clear Lake to Victoria.

María C. Gaztambide, UH’s new director and chief curator for public art, plans to send “Mobius Houston” to UH-Clear Lake next and hasn’t decided where it will go after that. “Any of the campuses that gets it will be delighted. It’s such a beautiful work,” she said.

Dramatically upscaled and fixed in space, “Mobius Houston” consists of nine, inch-thick, bicolor, trapezoidal acrylic panels that stand 11 feet tall and weigh 600 pounds apiece. Measuring 22 feet in diameter, it’s the largest structural acrylic sculpture of its kind. that gets it will be delighted. It’s such a beautiful work,” she said.

The weight means people won’t be playing around with moving parts as with Chilindrón’s other works. “At this scale, interaction happens because the sculpture is exposed to the sun, the rain,” the artist said. “It will look different as the sun moves around in the sky. Shadows will move. You can walk under it and be bathed in the color and shadows. The piece has some control over you, unlike the handling I usually do. You can relate to it with your whole body.”

“Mobius Houston” took several months to build. “The engineering aspects and lessons in mathematics and geometry were an unexpected delight,” said art consultant Lea Weingarten, who assisted with the commission and helped devise a master plan for UH’s 700-piece public art collection. Her team also produced “On Site,” a book with essays by Gaztambide and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston curator Alison de Lima Greene, to commemorate the collection’s 50th anniversary this year. “It has gone from being a collection of objects to a full-fledged program,” Weingarten said.

## Oldest in the state

UH boasts the state's oldest institutional public art collection. Its earliest works, mostly brawny bronzes, date to the early 1970s — the era of the university's first building boom. They were commissioned after the Board of Regents established Texas' first percent for art program, acknowledging the importance of public art by devoting 1 percent of construction costs for new buildings to commissioning or acquiring works.

More diverse pieces added in recent decades enliven interior as well as outdoor spaces, from Frank Stella's monumental murals in the Moores Opera House to the cloudlike fabric layers of Kendall Buster's hanging sculpture "Flow" within the College of Optometry.

The temporary public art program, also a first, is unrelated to the percent-for-art program, created with a gift from a private foundation. More nimble and flexible than the traditional, permanent commissioning process, it also allows the university to engage with a wider roster of artists, Gaztambide said. She envisions pop-ups and more ephemeral works, including digital art and performances.

The university is nearing the end of a three-year moratorium on percent-for-art purchases. Gaztambide said the pause allowed time to assess the collection, conserve and relocate existing works, enhance sites and adopt the master plan for art-centered placemaking across the UH System — so that "we bring the public back into public art."

## Physics lessons

The adventurous Houston design studio MetaLab, which has collaborated on nearly 100 public art projects, tackled Chilindrón's sculpture with a team that included Regal Plastics Houston, Star Precision and Rootlab. In the process, they created a marvel of engineering, fabrication and installation as well as aesthetics. The creation of each panel and hinge joint utilized four robotic processes — routing, laser cutting, machining and press-bake bending. The work also required fine hand-craftsmanship, including the gluing and jointing of each panel and the two-color painting of each joint.

"We're really pushing the boundaries of the structural abilities of this material," said project manager Marcel Merwin of MetaLab. Even the wood scaffolding and other equipment used to place the sculpture and its base are custom-made and will be stored with the piece. Almost as much work went into the design and building of the scaffolding and lifting equipment as went into the sculpture itself.

A graduate of Rice University's architecture school, Merwin was familiar with Möbius strips in concept. "In theory, a Möbius strip is a 2D planar system. It has no thickness. When it turns over and comes around, it attaches at the right place," he said. "But when you add thickness to it, suddenly it doesn't work correctly. We had to very carefully rotate the panels in our 3D model and find the exact angle at which it settles out and rotates."

Since those physics could not be budged, the "Mobius Houston" panels didn't line up perfectly. But the acrylic has just enough give that it could be teased and squeezed into position with the help of a tension system and bolts. Viewers won't know that, since the corners are contained within immovable steel pieces that resemble the hinges of Chilindrón's smaller sculptures.

"Mobius Houston" gave the artist a learning curve, too. Chilindrón expects she'll take the lessons to her next public project, a sculpture for Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem.

Naturally, she is thrilled that art has become an essential people magnet for activating public spaces. "Everybody should have access to art, even if you don't know what it's about," she said. "It's good for you."

*molly.glentzer@chron.com*