

Whose “R-Evolution”? Female Nude Sculpture on the National Mall Would Send Wrong Message

Recently, Catharsis on the Mall, a public vigil that aims to “promote healing and transformation in the community,” announced the possibility of placing a temporary sculpture of a giant female nude on the National Mall for their festival taking place November 10–12. Modeled after singer and dancer Deja Solis, the 45-foot-tall sculpture *R-Evolution* was created by artist [Marco Cochrane](#) for the 2015 Burning Man festival. Now, he is on a mission to raise funds to transport the work from his San Francisco studio to the National Mall in Washington, D.C.. Though the National Park Service gave preliminary approval for the sculpture, Cochrane and the event’s spokespeople are seeking its final approval so it can remain in place through February 25.

The monumental figure stands expressionless with her arms down by her side and palms facing outward in the yoga pose called Tadasana, or mountain pose. So, what type of picture will this paint? Certainly not a feminist one.



Rendering of *R-Evolution* as it would appear on the National Mall, if approved.

As Cochrane explained in the festival's press release,, *R-Evolution* is meant to evoke female empowerment, desexualize the female nude, and make viewers wonder "what the world would be like if women felt safe" in order to publicize issues of rape culture and female sexuality. In Cochrane's artist statement, where he claims to be a feminist, he argues that women should feel powerful and secure about their bodies without question, and in some respect, *R-Evolution* does dominate the space and command respect. But, these concepts are quickly lost when you actually look at *how* and *where* *R-Evolution* would appear.

First, a male artist creating a female nude in hopes of portraying female agency is instantly problematic – a man has constructed a woman through his male gaze. This is not to say that men cannot depict women empathetically, but as an outsider looking in, it implies a certain degree of assumption and speculation on the outsider's part. So, when Cochrane asserts that his pieces are about female empowerment but concludes that it is best represented when she has no clothes on, he unfortunately assumed wrong.

Second, *R-Evolution* is a skinny, young woman in the nude, literally embodying the ideal form of beauty. How can viewers desexualize the female nude when what they see is the stereotypical male desire personified?

Third, the nude's installation in front of a phallic symbol of male power, the Washington Monument, would create sexual tension, making it even harder for viewers to desexualize the female body. The figure's worshipful pose — with open palms, as if praying beneath, and possibly even to, the monument — and scale in relationship to the obelisk renders her inferior and submissive to the national landmark. And how does a naked woman standing next to an omnipresent phallic symbol in the quintessential patriarchal city evoke a feeling of safety? Unfortunately, it doesn't stop here.



R-Evolution as it appeared at Burning Man in 2015.

If approved, *R-Evolution* will face the White House, where arguably the most misogynistic president in our history currently resides. Unlike *Fearless Girl* staring down the bull on Wall Street, Cochrane's sculpture illustrates a passive, oversexualized woman. Though Trump may feel awkward (or even excited) to see it, the work would not confront but reaffirm his perception of women as sex objects, even when they're married to other heads of state.

What is even more perplexing is that recent news stories, like Hyperallergic's article, fail to question Cochrane's work as an appropriate image reflecting the feminist agenda. Simply because no one else has tried to make such a bold artistic statement – especially on the National Mall – does not make the piece the de facto idol of feminist ideology. But if his sculpture stands against these male symbols in such an objectified way, it would reinforce a misinformed message of male superiority and sexism more than “pro-female” anything.

This reveals how a piece's context influences the perception of the work. When *R-Evolution* first appeared at Burning Man in 2015 as part of “The Bliss Project.”

Cochrane had fulfilled *some* of his objectives. Placed within a liberal, free-expression environment, *R-Evolution* surely portrayed a confident, self-possessed woman. On the National Mall, however, the sculpture's message of female empowerment will be diminished, literally.

A stream of comments was posted on Hyperallergic's article, namely asserting that if an artistic, feminist statement is to be presented on the National Mall, should it not come from a woman first? Or, if it is offered by a man, aren't there better ways to tackle this subject? How about creating a sculpture that appropriates typical male attributes to neutralize the meanings of "feminine" and "masculine"? Now, *that* would have been empowering.