

Off the Wall

Art takes on new shapes when it fuses with the actual buildings of Mass MoCA – materializing in surprising and unusual forms, from a giant fish trap to sounds of an alternate reality. By Jackie Leavitt



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You might feel like Alice down the rabbit hole, shrunk to the size of a caterpillar, when you stand in the shadows of the giant art pieces at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA). Take, for example, *Nu Colossus*, a conical, 60-foot-long wooden Jamaican fish trap, which is part of the show *Sub Mirage Lignum* by artist Nari Ward. Or Federico Diaz's *Geometric Death Frequency - 141*, a 20-foot-tall pixelated-looking black wave (built like Legos out of round balls) frozen in time as it crashes against the building's outside wall. Some art pieces even surround you, like Stephen Vitiello's sound installment, which fills a whole room with noises and narratives coming from pipes, tubes, and tanks.

These might seem like bizarre and unusual pieces for a museum, but for Mass MoCA, this is the kind of art its curators work with and support every day. And that's the cool thing about this beacon of art in the Berkshires: Instead of artists trucking in their pieces to fill up empty, blank spaces like most galleries, many come here for the creation process, producing unique works that are infused with inspiration from the 13-acre museum campus that features more than 100,000 feet of exhibition space.

"The way I've worked now for 13 years," says Vitiello, "is filling a space with sound the way that one might fill it with sculptures. In general, I'm given empty spaces, but [at Mass MoCA,] this is a wonderful challenge because the physical spaces are already very sculptural." Because the museum's maze of buildings used to be a



One of Sol LeWitt's 105 wall paintings in *A Wall Drawing Retrospective*; (below) Nari Ward's *Nu Colossus* is a 60-foot-long rendition of a traditional Jamaican fish trap; (opposite) the black wave, designed by Federico Diaz, crashes against the Mass MoCA wall and even spills through the window into the building.

production plant for Sprague Electric (an electronics research and development facility that closed in 1985) many of the rooms that have not been renovated yet are still full of discarded equipment left by the company. In some of these massive old mill buildings, a maze of rusty pipes, tubes, and steam ducts crisscross overhead, while the metal hulks of abandoned tanks sit in corners and strings of wires slither up brick walls.

For his five-year-long installment, *All Those Vanished Engines*,



(ORANGE-AND-GREEN WALL) KEVIN KENNEDY; (SCULPTURE) ARTHUR EVANS



In his show, *Sub Mirage Lignum*, Nari Ward combines elements of his Jamaican-born and New York-raised background with objects found in the Mass MoCA buildings left over from Sprague Electric, like the small electrical devices that bejewel the 10-foot-tall *Mango Tourists*.

Vitiello selected the old boiler house - still adorned with remaining pipes - and for him, working with these three-dimensional elements is "thrilling." With the sound installation, he almost turns the room into a living thing that tells its own tale by surrounding visitors with a story of the building as if it had produced sounds instead of electronics. "There might be the buzz of static electricity from a pipe that could be coming from a wall," explains Vitiello. "From other places, you can actually hear the story [written by novelist and Williams College professor Paul Park] being read. It really haunts the space with sound."

Bits and pieces from the Mass MoCA buildings find their way into other installments, too, like Ward's yearlong *Sub Mirage Lignum*, comprising four structural elements, including the aforementioned giant fish trap, which uses split wood, scrap metal, and an old chimney from the property grounds. The installment also includes *Mango Tourists*, several 10-foot-tall foam "snowmen" bejeweled with Jamaican mango seeds and small metal capacitors (battery-like devices manufactured by Sprague in the '70s) that had been left in the space.

Ward always tries to find a balance between his art and the history surrounding the exhibition spaces so that a work has a conversation with that background but finds a way to not be dominated by it. Since Mass MoCA has such a prominent past as the electronics plant, which is still a major influence on it today, "the space challenges you to shift your usual expectation that you would have for a white cube," says Ward. He found that balance by using materials and objects from the property, like the capacitors and

wood, as added elements to his original vision that reflects his own Jamaican-born and New York-raised background.

And like the giant black wave crashing into the outside brick façade, other pieces adopt the actual walls into the art pieces, like the late Sol LeWitt's 25-year installment, *Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective*, with the paintings applied directly to the walls' surfaces. This career-spanning show displays 105 of LeWitt's large-scale full-wall paintings, featuring works completed between 1969 and 2007. In 2003, after being diagnosed with cancer at 75, LeWitt went to Mass MoCA and selected an empty building - without even interior walls - to eventually display his works. He designed the whole space, installing walls and then directing a crew of 62 painters to complete the three-floor installment.

With LeWitt's paintings, "the wall itself doesn't have the value; the idea [behind the design] has the value," explains Katherine Myers, Mass MoCA's director of marketing and public relations. So if you buy one of his pieces, you receive general proportional instructions for completing it yourself instead of owning a stationary object, and if you sell it, you'd pass along the directions and simply paint over your wall design. Unfortunately, LeWitt died in April 2007, never seeing the final product when it finished in November 2008.

"Collecting 105 [of his paintings] in one place - that has never been done before," says Myers. "This is the only place in the world to see this." And while she's making that point distinctly about LeWitt's exhibit since he has died, it seems like Mass MoCA may be the only place in the world to see a lot of never-been-done-before things. ♦