

MASS MoCA: Open, expansive, breathtaking

By Mary Gow Arts Correspondent
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Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) — bird's-eye view of campus and buildings — in North Adams, Massachusetts.
Courtesy MASS MoCA

Aslı Çavusoglu's installation with its neon letters based on revolutionary graffiti in Istanbul and its sets of pairings of words, English ones nearly synonymous but with disparate political and ideological associations — “illegal ≠ undocumented” or “Merry Christmas ≠ Happy Holidays” — had just been installed as COVID 19 charged into our lives in March. Çavusoglu is one of the 10 artists featured in “Kissing through a Curtain,” an expansive exhibition considering boundaries and attempts to communicate across them — an exhibition that fills eight galleries at MASS MoCA.

Blane De St. Croix's “How to Move a Landscape” was scheduled to open in the spring. His massive “Cold Front,” more than three stories tall evoking the face of a calving glacier, and his meticulous “Moving Landscape,” an endlessly rolling model train with flatcars carrying bits of biomes, are among the scores of artworks of all sizes and diverse media in this breathtaking multi-gallery exhibition considering what is happening to our planet.

These two long planned exhibitions, absorbing and compelling at any time, are both open now and are especially riveting during our current point in time.

“Kissing through a Curtain” and “How to Move a Landscape” are among more than 40 exhibitions currently at MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts. The nation's largest center for making, showing and performing contemporary art, MASS MoCA has more than 250,000 square feet of exhibition space. MASS MoCA focuses on large-scale immersive installations and exhibits art by known and emerging artists.

MASS MoCA reopened in July with health and safety protocols in place including timed reservations, limited numbers of viewers allowed in galleries, and 6-foot physical distancing. Between masks, space and numbers, visiting now is quieter than usual and offers an especially intimate opportunity to experience and engage with the art.

MASS MoCA warrants a trek to North Adams at any time, but the reopening and new exhibitions are reminders of how extraordinarily fortunate we are to have this resource nearby.

MASS MoCA, its full name Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, opened in 1999. A stunning example of adaptive reuse, its home is a sprawling interconnected 19th-century industrial complex. The renovation of Building 6, opened in 2017, doubling the center's size.

O. Arnold and Company opened its factory doors at this site in 1860, soon becoming a major purveyor of fabric for the Union Army. The Arnold Print Works grew to be one of the leading textile printing companies in the world, employing more than 3,000 people in the early 1900s and with a campus of 25 buildings. This hive of brick factories with distinctive windows, clock tower, passageways and courtyards is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1942, the Arnold Print Works complex sold to Sprague Electric, a state of the art research and development center that produced electrical components, including some used in Gemini moon missions. Employing more than 4,000 people in North Adams at its peak, Sprague closed this location in 1985.

With Sprague and its jobs gone and buildings vacant, North Adams was looking for opportunities for reuse of the complex. Williams College Museum of Art at the same time was looking for space to exhibit large — really large — works of art and installations. From those two sparks, the bold plan for MASS MoCA ignited.

In 1988, Joseph C. Thompson, was named founding director of MASS MoCA and spearheaded the project's launch. Thompson announced this month that he will be stepping down in October but will continue as special counsel to the board of directors.

The breadth of artwork at MASS MoCA is always astonishing. Along with "How to Move a Landscape" and "Kissing through a Curtain," Sarah Oppenheimer's "S-334473" just opened. Installed on the second floor of Building 6, her two massive steel and glass instruments divide the gallery space. Precisely engineered, each of the two glass boxes pivots on a 45-degree axis. In their horizontal position, they reflect the streetscape seen through the gallery windows. In vertical position they echo the columns of the structure.

Long-term exhibitions include Sol LeWitt's "A Wall-Drawing Retrospective" and James Turrell's "Into the Light."

LeWitt's 105 wall drawings fill three floors of galleries. A leading exponent of Minimalist and Conceptual art, LeWitt stressed the idea behind art over its execution. For each wall, he had a set of directions. The overall work was then executed by over 60 artists and art students. From simple directions, the walls emerge as complex — some as bold geometric shapes in bright colors, some with fine graphite lines that draw the viewer to look closely to see the straightforward underlying patterns.

Turrell uses light as his medium — shaping and sculpting it and bringing viewers into immersive experiences with it. Works from six decades of his career are presented in specially constructed galleries. In one, viewers enter a room that through the experience is bathed in shifting colored light — and as they are surrounded by one color, light orange for example, looking out through the square entry portal, they see that they perceive white wall opposite the space as blue — orange's complement.

"Kissing through a Curtain" gets its name from an exchange on the act of translation, as recounted by poet Kwame Dawes.

"How would you like to be kissed through a curtain?"

“Better than not kissing at all.”

Considering translation and boundaries, the 10 artists draw viewers from the experience of segregation in Chicago to boundaries experienced by hearing-impaired in film to Justin Favela’s revisiting of paintings by one of Mexico’s leading landscape artists.

De St. Croix’s “How to Move a Landscape” jolts viewers back to the reality and immediacy of climate change with works including collage, sculpture and film. His massive “Hollow Ground,” evoking an expanse of arctic permafrost, can be experienced from ground level, beneath and around it, and from a balcony from an upper level. The rotting holes eloquently speaking to how quickly Earth is changing.

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Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art

Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) is located at 1040 MASS MoCA Way in North Adams, Massachusetts. Hours are: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesdays-Mondays; admission is \$20, \$18 for seniors and veterans, \$12 for students with ID, \$8 ages 6-16; for reservations (required) information, call 413-662-2111, or go online to massmoca.org

Travel requirements

MASS MoCA requires guests to schedule their visits in advance. Visitors are asked to provide contact information in case contact tracing is necessary. The museum’s full COVID Courtesy Code is online at massmoca.org/event/code-of-courtesy/

Before you go, check the latest state travel guidelines. Vermont allows quarantine-free travel to counties across the Northeast with low rates of COVID-19. Travel restrictions are updated every Friday on accd.vermont.gov/covid-19/restart/cross-state-travel Massachusetts is currently allowing quarantine-free visits from low-risk states, including Vermont. Check the list before you go at mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-travel-order
