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Everything That Rises Must Converge
MASS MoCA
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Elusive Yet Expressive

Just when you've decided that Petah Coyne's sculptures, now at MASS MoCA, might well be about the macabre, you're struck by how the most compelling thing about them is their sheer beauty.

North Adams, Mass. The generally gorgeous and uncanny exhibition of Petah Coyne's sculptures and photographs at MASS MoCA is tantalizingly titled "Everything That Rises Must Converge"—a reference to the eponymous 1963 short story by Flannery O'Connor. It's about as evocative an exhibition as you're likely to see—even if you're not quite certain what it is the artist means to evoke. One series of galleries surveys Ms. Coyne's sculptures since the 1980s, while another displays seemingly unrelated photographs from the '90s to the present. This is an artist whose work has long remained somehow just out of reach, presumably by intention. But that elusiveness, as well as the intensely tactile qualities of the sculpture, plays with our instinct to reach out and grasp whatever it is she's trying to do.

Perhaps it begins with the viewer's natural attempt to figure out the artist's sculptural materials. They are actually pretty straightforward, if varied and plentiful, and the labels identify everything, just in case you're not certain. There's something endearing about a work made out of (for example) "taxidermy birds, silk flowers, silk/rayon velvet, plaster statuary, feathers, specially-formulated wax, cable, cable nuts, acrylic paint, black spray paint, plaster, chicken wire fencing, metal hardware, felt, pearl-headed hat pins, pigment, thread, wire, plywood, wood, vinyl." All that information doesn't in the least demystify "Untitled #1240 (Black Cloud), 2007-08"; rather, it's the accretion of so much ordinary stuff, magically reassembled, that adds to the elusiveness—and the immense appeal—of Ms. Coyne's sculptures.

The work reflects assemblage modes from Pablo Picasso and Kurt Schwitters to Robert Rauschenberg and Jim Dine, and surrealist sensibilities of artists such as Max Ernst, Meret Oppenheim and Ivan Albright. An array of conflicting associations flitters before our eyes—life and death, nature and the unnatural, beautiful and grotesque, ghostly dream and rude awakening—but none quite sticks. There are mysterious associations: Miss Havisham's dining room? The Bates Motel? Perhaps even Lourdes, as in "Untitled #1093 (Buddha Boy), 2001-03," a massive and commanding monochromatic work in which melted wax candles and an array of pearls hide what seems to be a confounding Madonna figure. But every associative reach insists that the only way to view this work is on its own terms, whatever they might be. And just when you've decided that these sculptures might well be about the macabre, you're struck by how the most compelling thing about them is their sheer beauty.

That's certainly the case in Mass MoCA's immense galleries, where the most recent sculptures sing with the elegance of a Bach chorale heard in some great gothic cathedral, reminding us that the best of these reinhabited former industrial spaces (this was once a factory) can also connote an ecclesiastical environment. Ms. Coyne's considerable knowledge of earlier art reveals itself impressively. There's a sense of magic and wonder in her array of real taxidermy birds—exotic ones most of us can't identify, as well as familiar peacocks—that references those over-the-top Dutch Baroque still-life paintings by artists such as Jan Weenix (1642-1719), who used peacocks as the centerpiece for stunning paintings. As in those paintings, the use of the peacock as a source for decorative motifs is part of a tradition going back to the Roman catacombs and continuing to James McNeill Whistler's Peacock Room (1876-77, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington). Ms. Coyne asserts her awareness that "peacocks have all these references of immortality and regeneration"—very much a part of Christian iconography. There are ancient Greek references as well, and Pythagoras wrote that Homer's soul moved into a peacock, as a way of describing his immortality. And there's the peacock's strutting that has always been a symbol of vanity.

All of those qualities come together triumphantly in Ms. Coyne's vast peacock installation here. Indeed, one is struck as much by the ambition, and perhaps vanity, behind this dazzling array as by the fragility and difficulty of installation—in contrast with the symbolic sense of immortality (and thus permanence). But therein lies so much of this exhibition's appeal. Ms. Coyne's fascination with an apparently endless array of materials and ways in which she can focus our attention on their potential for emotionally expressive, if elusive, messages gives the exhibition its power. That's true even in the more macabre works, such as "Untitled #720 (Eguchi's Ghost), 1992/2007," in which she appears to be trying to free herself from the influence of precursors such as Joseph Beuys and Robert Morris.

The suggestiveness of Ms. Coyne's photographs might derive from a wholly different aesthetic impulse. And yet they share in the suggestive power of all this artist's work. Can one read anything into the fact that the sculptures all emphasize the concept of still-life–known in French as nature morte (dead nature)—while the photographs are all about attempting to capture a feeling of lively movement? Probably not, but it's a tantalizing issue here, and some of the photographic tableaux, especially those in the Monk Series (1992-97), remind us that Ms. Coyne's finely tuned, and always evolving, aesthetic sensibility easily merits the generous spaces allotted her in this splendid exhibition.

Mr. Freudenheim, a former art museum director, served as the assistant secretary for museums at the Smithsonian Institution.

Photo: Art Evans
Front to back: 'Untitled #1181 (Dante's Daphne), 2004-06' and 'Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu), 2009-10.'