

GAGOSIAN

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At Mass MoCA, the richness of ritual, the magic of masks

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Taryn Simon's "A Cold Hole" at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. © DAVID DASHIELL.

NORTH ADAMS — A darkened gallery, a black cube, has one glowing window on to a white gallery, where the floor is covered with a thick layer of ice. In the white ice is a black square: a deep and narrow pool of brutally cold water.

Safe in the dark behind the window, we watch a woman in a bathing suit and T-shirt walk across the ice and perch beside the pool, which is no wider or longer than a coffin. She will jump. She must jump. We are riveted to the lone, chilly figure standing on the ice, contemplating a frigid plunge.

She jumps! And as the bitter cold engulfs her and momentarily stuns her system, we, too, hold our breath. Then she emerges, up a ladder. We are relieved, happy, even pleased with ourselves. She did it!

In an art-historical framework, Taryn Simon's "A Cold Hole" installation, at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art through March, is a spiritual descendant of a Kazimir Malevich painting: "Black Square," a foundational block of modernism, and what Malevich saw as a new beginning, free of the strictures of story and space.

Still, Malevich deployed tradition in his display. In a 1915 exhibition he positioned the painting high in a corner of the room, where a Russian Orthodox icon would be found in a home. Meaning in ritual and composition can be so hardwired it's impossible to abandon.

That wiring is Simon's sweet spot. Ritual is a kind of sorcery, tapping our automatic responses. She practices it on us with two age-old rites at Mass MoCA: jumping into icy water, and applause.

What, you wonder, could be more innocent, more benign? The Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder enjoyed cold-water baths. Applause has signaled acclamation since at least that far back. But rituals, always scripted and frequently public, have social force. They compel us to act.

For "Assembled Audience," Simon recorded volunteers clapping at three venues in Columbus, Ohio, a regular stopover for presidential campaigns. Audience members at athletic events, concerts, and conferences participated. She blended their individual claps into a sound piece that ranges from scattered to thundering.

It plays in a darkened space. With nothing to look at, a viewer becomes the object of the applause. I walked in to a smattering of claps. As the applause rose, I puffed right up. I confess: I bowed. And I thought of the electric charge a master of applause such as President Trump gets at his rallies. Push the right buttons, and be washed with worship.

Applause sounds public, but the darkened experience of "Assembled Audience" is private. An icy plunge may seem more private, but not always. Russian President Vladimir Putin made a small spectacle of himself taking a cold plunge the day Trump was inaugurated. Was he sending a message about his virility, as he seems wont to do?

Likewise, "Cold Hole" is a performance. Individual performers — some of them volunteers — immerse themselves regularly throughout the day.

The small audience I joined was fixated. The painterly setup, black and white, squares within squares, pulls the eye to the center. Then we viscerally apprehend the performer's experience. We understand the grit and the folly of this ritual — how it brings you face to face with your mortal self as your lungs freeze, until you emerge, alive and gasping for air.

Simon points out what happens to us in the grip of rituals, perhaps so we can be less caught in their thrall. But alongside a cool eye on their social power, "Cold Hole" and "Assembled Audience" inevitably provide glimmers of their transformative magic. Like a drug, they are curative, and they can mess you up.

Scarily surreal life among the pines

"Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch," a ghostly, textured show also at Mass MoCA through March, is shamanic in its rendering of a swampy north Florida landscape and the way it has shaped the lives and imagination of its inhabitants.

Hamilton grew up there, in a place shadowed by pine forests that fed the turpentine industry, which for decades provided back-breaking work to African-Americans.

It's a gothic setting, thick with Spanish moss, humidity, and family. Hamilton conjures it up with her own grove of pines — thick, sappy trunks that fill the gallery. Paintings on pine boards, like

hand-scrawled signs along a rural route, are studded with roughly painted stars and ominous language, such as “wicked problem.” These road signs point inward.

A mesmerizing four-channel video installation and photographs convey the spirit of the place — decaying buildings, church music, wild horses, spinning canopies of leaves. People appear like phantasms, wearing masks — Hamilton, in a housedress and a beaky skull; another woman in a fox mask, carrying a dead pheasant. Like rituals, masks channel a connection to worlds just below the surface, where power and fear are more naked and electric, where reason has less of a toehold.

Fencing masks adorned with feathers hang on the wall alongside spears made from an old wrought-iron garden fence, appropriated from the domestic realm into a more dangerous magical one. On the floor, taxidermy alligators eat each other’s tails, a swampy version of the mystical ouroboros: At once a symbol of wholeness, and of the way kin can eat each other up.

Hamilton’s version of life among the pines is scarily surreal, but it’s loamy and fertile, and recalls the generative nature of myth — spun out in fairy tales, woven into our own psyches, consumed again by our children, and played out through generations in dreams, nightmares, and art.