



Eli Levenstein (b. 1978, Englewood, New Jersey)

Reading Room for MASS MoCA, 2008–2010

Bubble wrap, nylon cord, textiles, carpet, Astroturf, twine, buckles, buckwheat hulls, goose down, paper clips, telephone wire, extension cords, stainless steel rings, light fixtures and bulbs

Courtesy the designer

Working with readily available, off-the-shelf materials furniture designer Eli Levenstein makes works that function as useable objects and as sculpture. His designs and material choices begin with the physical or economic parameters of a project and address in particular how his materials work, emphasizing the ways in which they respond to laws of physics while creating structure. By “redefining environments” with his furniture, Levenstein questions our notions of utility and value while addressing individuals’ relationships to their own bodies, to one another, and to their surroundings. The intimate *Reading Room* at MASS MoCA, with its canopy of lights and floor-bound furniture, was inspired by a mix of natural and man-made forms ranging from Western mesas, petrified tree stumps, and cavernous grottos to the groin vaults and buttresses of Gothic cathedrals. The anthropomorphic, tube-like floor cushions — which are reminiscent of strange, pliable limbs and organs — are meant to be moved, stacked, or re-positioned to suit different readers’ particular needs.

MATERIAL WORLD

SCULPTURE TO ENVIRONMENT

The exhibition is made possible by an Emily Hall Tremaine Exhibition Award. The Exhibition Award program was founded in 1998 to honor Emily Hall Tremaine. It rewards innovation and experimentation among curators by supporting thematic exhibitions that challenge audiences and expand the boundaries of contemporary art.



Tremaine Foundation



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Organized by Susan Cross, curator.

An exhibition catalogue with more in-depth information on the show and the featured artists will be available summer 2010.

For *Material World* MASS MoCA invited seven artists known for their use of rather modest or precarious materials to transform our second- and third-floor galleries. Working both against and in concert with the museum’s reclaimed factory space, its history, and rich assemblage of solid brick walls, sturdy wooden columns, and immobile steel beams, the artists employ factory-made materials themselves, though theirs are strikingly delicate or malleable by comparison: translucent fishing line, fragile rolls of paper, flexible plaits of rope, wafer-thin sheets of plastic sheeting. These dramatic juxtapositions emphasize the distinctively different characteristics of the opposing materials as well as the surprising strength and presence of the artists’ own relatively humble media. Obsessively accumulated, these materials have been transformed into monumental installations, confronting — and sometimes dwarfing — viewers with their size and scale. Yet most retain a sense of their distinctly hand-worked feel despite their industrial roots. The immense physical effort and labor required to make the works — as well as the artists’ intimate engagement with the materials — is palpable. Transformed themselves, these mundane, re-purposed

materials in turn have been used to alter our perceptions of the museum building, the built environment in general, and indeed space itself.

The exhibition reflects two long-accepted tendencies in contemporary art practices which have been evolving since the early 20th century: the embrace of non-art materials and an interest in the object’s relationship to its site — and to the viewer. The former predominance of the discrete art object has all but given way to art which engages both time and space, offering viewers what has been variously described as a theatrical, sensory, or participatory experience. Hovering between object and environment, the diverse installations on view are unified by the artists’ manipulation of a simple, single (or limited palate of) material variously chosen for formal, structural, or symbolic characteristics. Perhaps most importantly the artists also share an interest in the performative nature of their installations which provoke a constantly changing, peripatetic viewing experience. Together, these extraordinary environments made from ordinary things create a range of visceral, tactile, spatial, psychological, and perceptual encounters.

MASS MoCA

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Michael Beutler (b. 1976, Oldenburg, Germany)

Lightning Generation, 2010
Aluminum, wood, brushes, weights

Courtesy the artist and Franco Soffiantino Gallery, Turin

Working in response to specific sites, using an array of low-budget materials from paper to plastic and scrap wood, Michael Beutler re-interprets standardized building components and methods of labor in his architecturally-inspired work. In a DIY style, the artist creates machine-like tools to score, bend, or cut his materials, combining a factory assembly-line approach with hand wrought work. Emphasizing this process, the artist exhibits his devices alongside his finished constructions. Inspired by the prevalence of turned wood in New England, at MASS MoCA Beutler incorporated into his art-making apparatus a wooden die turned with a lathe which he then used to shape rolls of aluminum into massive, timber-like, metal columns. Turning the gallery back into a work environment (as it was for 120 years prior to the museum's tenancy), Beutler leaves the viewer to imagine what might be assembled with the surprisingly sturdy, but feather-light building blocks. The work's title refers to the gallery's history as a Sprague Electric laboratory used for generating powerful bolts of electricity with high voltage capacitors.



Orly Genger (b. 1979, New York)

Big Boss, 2009–2010
Rope, paint

Courtesy the artist and Larissa Goldston Gallery, New York

Created with 100 miles of knotted rope Orly Genger's installation commands the space with a towering wall that bursts through the architecture and falls into a riotous spill of material. Forcing viewers to rethink their path, the distinct elements articulate the structural potential and strength of the rope as well as its softer side. Genger's work often grapples with a male-dominated history of sculpture and with the legacy of artists such as Tony Smith and Richard Serra. Hand-working her industrial material in an adapted crochet stitch, Genger introduces a traditionally female-identified craft process into an artistic idiom associated with a certain muscular bravado. Yet Genger's own process—which has her wrestling with large amounts of the heavy material—is overtly physical. (Images of body-builders are pinned to Genger's studio wall). The "Big Boss" of the title might refer to the labor the rope demands of Genger, or perhaps to her mastery over the material. Painting the rope a vivid red, the artist matches the material's presence with an equally forceful color.



Wade Kavanaugh and Stephen B. Nguyen

(b. 1979, Portland, Maine, and b. 1976, Little Falls, Minnesota)

White Stag, 2009–2010
Paper, wood

Courtesy the artists

Wade Kavanaugh and Stephen B. Nguyen have been working with paper since their first collaboration in 2005. The versatility of the material—which can be flat or volumetric, smooth or textured, buoyant or heavy—allow the artists a wide range of possibilities for their large-scale installations which they describe as "investigations of the uncertain territory between imagined and physical space." At MASS MoCA the duo has responded to the museum's industrial, brick architecture with its imagined opposite: a fantastical, old growth forest fashioned from twisted, crumpled, and draped rolls of paper. The ghostly image of the decaying natural landscape, however, mirrors in some way the fading industrial landscape embodied by the museum's repurposed factory spaces. Spanning two floors, the installation appears to grow from one gallery to the next, joining the separate spaces and providing viewers a different perspective on the labyrinthine building.



Tobias Putrih (b. 1972, Kranj, Slovenia)

Re-projection: Hoosac, 2010
Monofilament, spotlight

Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York

Influenced by the utopian projects—and notable failures—of innovative artists and designers such as Buckminster Fuller, Frederick Kiesler, and Charles Eames, Tobias Putrih likens his works to experiments, or design prototypes. His use of cheap materials, including egg crates, cardboard, and plywood signify both a sense of potential and impending collapse. Many of the artist's works reference the architecture and spectacle of the cinema: a space suspended between fantasy and reality, image and environment. With *Re-projection: Hoosac* Putrih distills the cinema to its most basic element: fishing line stretched across the gallery mimics the conical trajectory of a beam of light. A spotlight hits the strands of monofilament which in turn become a screen, reflecting an image in illuminated dots. Inspired by the Hoosac Tunnel just east of North Adams—a storied, engineering marvel that draws ghost-hunters to the area—Putrih's tunnel is, likewise, both real and a representation, an optical trick that invites both wonder and investigation.

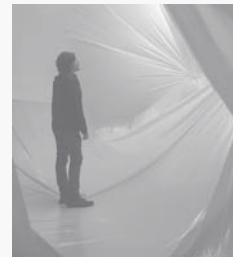


Alyson Shotz (b. 1964, Glendale, Arizona)

The Geometry of Light, 2010
Plastic Fresnel lens sheets, silvered glass beads, stainless steel wire

Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York

Reflective and transparent materials—including mirror, piano wire, acrylic, and various forms of plastic—reoccur in Alyson Shotz's works which investigate both light and space. Perpetual change is the one constant in the artist's sculptures which look different one moment to the next; a shift in light or the viewer's vantage point altering the appearance of her material. Shotz's immersive installations aim to provoke changes in the viewers' perception (or misperception) of their surroundings—be that the gallery or the greater universe. Influenced by the fields of math and science, including theoretical physics, Shotz makes the invisible visible, expressing materially the trajectory of sound waves or the spatial dimensions of string theory, or the effects of hyperbolic space. Made with hand-cut, plastic magnifying lenses as well as glass beads, *The Geometry of Light* transforms the gallery into a play of reflection and shadow while conjuring images of light hurtling through space or bending under the gravitational pull of some distant galaxy.



Dan Steinhilber (b. 1972, Oshkosh, Wisconsin)

Breathing Room, 2010
Plastic sheeting, fans, twine

Courtesy the artist

Dan Steinhilber's works grow out of our physical and psychological relationship to everyday materials. He describes his works—which emphasize the kinetic and performative possibilities of sculpture—as material reconfigurations of simple actions, such as cinching a garbage bag or wrapping a package. Interested in the human urge to control our environment, Steinhilber also makes use of household tools such as vacuum cleaners, lawn mowers, and weed whackers in his work. With *Breathing Room* he creates a simultaneously seductive and threatening environment that moves—constantly changing as it defies or succumbs to gravity, inflating and deflating with the movement of air controlled by two fans. The installation brings to mind a range of associations: a melting ice cave, a body cavity, a hazmat tent, a torn plastic bag. Playing with definitions of inside and outside, the artist locates his viewers, outside, under, or on top of the object of particular consequence for him: the sculptural form created by the union of the museum's architecture with the plastic—the space where air from the exterior is allowed to penetrate the museum's protective walls.