This exhibition borrows its title from a short story written in 1963 by Flannery O’Connor (1925–1964). O’Connor’s writing, like the sculpture of Petah Coyne, takes dark turns while simultaneously referencing themes of human weakness, morality and redemption.

The works in this largest retrospective of the artist’s work to date range from her earlier and more abstract sculptures using industrial materials to newer works made of delicate wax. All of Coyne’s works take inspiration from personal stories, film, literature and political events. Coyne takes these sources and applies a Baroque sense of decadent refinement, imbuing her work with a magical quality to evoke intensely personal associations.

Together these diverse yet intimately connected periods of Coyne’s practice make evident an evolution, which highlights the artist’s own blend of symbolism alongside an innovative use of materials including black sand, car parts, wax, satin ribbons, trees, silk flowers, and taxidermy.

Coyne’s works both rise and converge at MASS MoCA, making palpable the inherent tensions between vulnerability and aggression, innocence and seduction, beauty and decadence, and, ultimately, life and death.
In the late 1980s Coyne discovered “black sand,” a by-product of pig iron casting. **Untitled #670 (Black Heart),** 1990, references the vulnerability and awkwardness of life that Coyne experienced while viewing open-heart surgery. **Black Heart** hangs from the ceiling as an amorphous lump, referencing the anatomical rather than anthropomorphic organ. The black sand surface then glints, adding a sense of animation. **Untitled #638 (Whirlwind),** 1989, has the hangar elements like small flowers on the floor recalling a convergence of religious statuary and a candle-strewn altarpiece. This small sculpture requires viewers to kneel down in order to see the female face that emerges from the dripping white wax, pearls and flowers. Coyne made this work just after September 11, 2001. Seeing people flee the twin towers covered in white ash recalled, for Coyne, the white make-up of Butoh, the dance form that was a direct result of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. However, Coyne was also amazed at the camera-raderie of New York City in the aftermath of this crisis and the hundreds of personal shrines that covered its streets.

In 1997 Coyne began a series inspired by Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* (1308–21). The first of Dante’s characters to appear is **Untitled #1205 (Virgil),** 1997–2008, based on the Roman poet and Dante’s guide through *The Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. *The Inferno* begins by referencing the dark woods. Coyne’s Virgil actually becomes the woods: deep black with hints of dark reds and purples appear before viewers like a tangle of tree. Tucked within the mass are a taxidermy bobcat and game bird, the first referencing Virgil and the second, Dante. Also in this series is **Untitled #1180 (Beatrice),** 2003–2008, which radiates energy, color and motion. Beatrice Portinari was Dante’s muse who inspired his *La Vita Nuova* (1295) and served as his guide through *Paradiso*.

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In Untitled #1336 (**Scalapino Nu Shu**), 2009–2010, an apple tree covered in black sand is populated with taxidermy pheasants and peacocks. Peacocks were important to Flannery O’Connor, who wrote about and raised them, and saw them as symbols of renewal and the “eyes” of the Catholic Church. The peacocks in Coyne’s tree are brilliant, but rather than preening they seem strangely frozen in time, anticipating. This sense of waiting is embodied in *Nu Shu*, a centuries-old Chinese writing technique solely for women and used to secretly express loneliness and fear. Knowing this back story gives Coyne’s peacocks something to anticipate—a story told in secret writing to an intimate friend. The title of the work references Coyne’s own friendship with poet Leslie Scalapino.**

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In Untitled #1093 (**Buddha Boy**), 2001–2003, looks like a convergence of religious statuary and a candle-strewn altarpiece. This small sculpture requires viewers to kneel down in order to see the female face that emerges from the dripping white wax, pearls and flowers. Coyne made this work just after September 11, 2001. Seeing people flee the twin towers covered in white ash recalled, for Coyne, the white make-up of Butoh, the dance form that was a direct result of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. However, Coyne was also amazed at the camera-raderie of New York City in the aftermath of this crisis and the hundreds of personal shrines that covered its streets.

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