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Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, Massachusetts

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Nearly two dozen different exhibitions fill the museum's galleries, a superabundance of art



A visitor looks at part of Anselm Kiefer's 'Velimir Khlebnikov' (2004) at the Hall Art Foundation. Photo: Arthur Evans

In the waning days of summer, the deep, consoling green of the Berkshire Hills acquires a yellowish tinge, and exhausted gardens begin to wilt. Inside the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MOCA), though, the galleries are filled with wild, springlike excess. Nearly two dozen different exhibitions, a few practically perennial, others more

fleeting, twine through the museum's vast factory floors, darkened nooks, rusting machine rooms and no-frills sheds.

If the shows share any common aesthetic, it's a taste for multitudinous pleasures, for the sheer copiousness of the imagination. Liz Deschenes' austere rectangles of translucent blue, Jim Shaw's rococo pop cathedrals, Susannah Sayler and Edward Morris's animated video eulogy for the extinct passenger pigeon, Anselm Kiefer's waves of shattered concrete, Mark Dion's octagonal sanctum crammed with private, cryptic mementoes, Stephen Vitiello's clanking, humming boiler room — the whole dizzying collection offers a range of experiences from reverence to disgust. The complex in the industrious town of North Adams, Mass., once churned out printed fabrics for the Union Army, bomb parts and capacitors for household radios. Those businesses are long gone and art has infiltrated every corner, like a creeping jungle taking over an abandoned city.

It would be hard to explore this superabundance without confronting *Clifford Ross: Landscape Seen & Imagined* — or, at any rate, it would be a mistake. “Sopris Wall I” may be the most immersive photograph I've ever seen, a landscape three stories tall and as long as a ballroom — so big that it doesn't fit all at once within my field of vision; I can only see it in segments. But size is the least of the picture's virtues. By printing in negative on wooden panels, Ross has turned a chocolate-box view of Mount Sopris, a perfectly isosceles peak in Colorado with a lake fringed by bowing aspens, into a strange, enveloping dreamscape. The shapes are sharply defined but the black-and-tan palette spreads shadows and murk throughout the scene, giving it the expressive mystery of a Chinese scroll.

Ross's magnificent “Hurricane” fills the stifling attic of another building. To shoot this series, he waited for tropical storms to announce themselves on the east end of Long Island, then donned a wetsuit and a flotation device, and waded out into the ferocious surf. (An assistant kept him tethered to dry land.) He returned with large-format photographs that capture not just the impassive violence of ocean water, but the architectural variety it takes. Some waves curl to form seductive caves, others look smooth and dense as polished oak, still others dissipate in cottony clouds of surf. All of them bear terrifyingly down on the lens.

After Ross's essay on the sublime, Jim Shaw's *Entertaining Doubts* comes as a sceptical tonic. Shaw plies viewers with theatre, humour and a tender appreciation of kitsch, shaping his world out of recycled imagery and salvaged backdrops. Vaguely familiar cardboard cutouts (from a Caspar David Friedrich painting, for example) stand in front of hazy landscapes and tacky medieval churches painted on cloth. Barbara Bush in her First Lady days orates from inside a pulpit of fire, which burns before a borrowed mountain meadow. (It also recalls the winsomely flaming Joan of Arc on the back cover of the 1967 album *Songs of Leonard Cohen*.) Walk through the door of a cobwebbed gas station and inside, a trio of

plastic dwarfs huddles over a baby-sized hunk of glowing green crystal — kryptonite, perhaps, merging fairy tale and comic-book legend in a pseudo-religious tableau.

Shaw expresses deep ambivalence about faith: he invented the content-free religion of Oism, essentially so he could supply it with imagery and ritual. But he's less sardonic about Superman, whose costume never creases and whose forelock remains immaculate despite episodes of frailty and pain. The Man of Steel pops up all over this show, though he spends more of it suffering than leaping tall buildings. A penitential procession takes us through a gallery hung with tattered banners depicting the Passion of the Superhero. Rendered in confident strokes, a black-and-white Superman slumps and writhes against brooding cityscapes. At last he is reduced to a pile of severed but still unmistakable limbs spilling off a high shelf. I couldn't help but think of Yeats's lines about heroes: "Come let us mock at the great" who never "thought of the levelling wind."

Beyond Shaw's festival of doubt comes Francesco Clemente's *Encampment*, a disappointing cluster of painted tents that fade into the hall's immensity. Viewed from the overlook at the end of the gallery, they appear like a high-fashion nomadic village, the exteriors printed in pretty pink-and-blue camouflage. Inside, the fabric walls offer a profusion of symbolic imagery that manages to be at once lightweight and heavy-handed: sacrificial angels, rapacious birds, dignified cat gods and capitalists in top hats and monocles casually enslaving the planet. And since no Clemente show would be complete without a celebration of his narcissism, one of the tents is given over to self-portraits.

Clemente grazes so many topics that he comes off as a dilettante of outrage, but if you're in the mood for truly brow-furrowing contemplation of existential questions, then step outside, cross a bridge, and enter the Hall Art Foundation, which contains three huge installations by Anselm Kiefer. In the first, an undulating ruin of concrete and exposed rebar presents violence as a timeless force of nature. In the next, a ward of beds, each draped with a rumpled sheet of lead, pays tribute to the female heroes of the French Revolution. Finally, a separate pavilion is stocked with 30 three-dimensional sea paintings, exploding with waves and rust and ruined craft. The surface of each canvas is a chipped and cracked topography, encrusted with thick white spray and ochre light. The oceans look bruised.

Kiefer's roiling series evokes the ravishing rage of JMW Turner's seascapes and also echoes Ross's hurricane photos. That's the wonder of Mass MOCA: even in the more or less random collision of shows that just now happen to fill this voracious museum, artists who ostensibly have little in common communicate across the asphalt courtyard, harmonising with the brick walls and brittle steel.

massmoca.org, hallartfoundation.org