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From filtration plant to art gallery, MASS MoCA renovates unused building to house its large new show

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Jeremy Goodwin

A former filtration plant will house large-scale works by German artist Anselm Kiefer

When MASS MoCA in North Adams opens a new art show, it's not always as simple as clearing out a gallery for new work. For a monumental new exhibition slated to stay open for fifteen years, the museum is renovating an entire building to press it into service.

The converted-factory setting of MASS MoCA's rambling campus offers it plenty of space to work with. But for a new exhibition of large-scale works by the German artist Anselm Kiefer, the museum is retrofitting a unused building that once held one million gallons of water as the filtration plant for the Sprague Electric Company.

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On a recent afternoon, a small construction crew attaches sheets of corrugated metal to the walls of an enclosed steel pavilion within the building. It will be a climate controlled gallery housing a series of thirty mixed-media paintings.

Nearby, museum director Joe Thompson pulls back the flaps of a long tent to reveal the eighty-two foot long sculpture beneath—a cascading mass of twisted concrete resembling a section of collapsed highway overpass.

"Big waves of concrete and they stack up on each other. They're fierce. It looks terribly dangerous. There's all these protruding pieces of bent rebar. It's rugged, threatening, raw sculpture. I worried at first that, you know, people would impale themselves on it, but it looks so dangerous people steer clear of it."

An expansive installation including thirty beds made of lead, plus a brand new commission, will round out the exhibition. It will stay on view here for at least fifteen years. Though MASS MoCA has previously focused on temporary exhibitions, this project echoes the successful longterm installation of Sol LeWitt wall drawings. That began a 25-year exhibition in a previously unused building in 2008, and it earned a designation in Time Magazine as the most notable museum show of the year.

Kiefer's artwork is lent by the Connecticut-based collector and hedge fund manager Andrew Hall, best known for making many millions off oil trading. Hall says he's spending between one and two million dollars on the renovation and installation at MASS MoCA.

"There will be very few places in the world where you can see an installation like this of Kiefer's work, certainly on a longterm basis. Unfortunately, for most of the time since we've owned it it's been in storage, so it's going to be great to get it out of storage where it can be seen and be appreciated."

When the new show opens, MASS MoCA will be using four hundred fifty thousand square feet of its six hundred square feet of potential gallery space. Thompson says that moves the museum closer to a previously unthinkable milestone.

"Only recently have i begun to look and think: Oh, we could run out of space here."

The exhibition opens on September 27th.