



At MoCA, Yesterday's Coming Back Tomorrow

In Mass MoCA's latest show, "These Days: Elegies for Modern Times," a group of artists takes the idea of an elegy -- that is, a look back with sorrow -- and aims it toward the future. In doing so, time is utilized as a mirror that aims back at itself, creating an infinite stream from the which the artists pull chunks to fashion their works.

The intent of the show is best summed up in Pawel Wojtasik's "Below Sea Level," a monumental panoramic video work with accompanying soundscapes by Stephen Vitiello. Inspired by 19th-century cycloramas -- paintings that depicted a 360-degree visual of historical scenes -- Wojtasik creates a circular video version depicting New Orleans and the Mississippi delta as an area in crisis.

With a curved screen of 35 feet winding around upon itself, Wojtasik offers a whirling tapestry for the viewer, mixing in the cultures of the area with the wetlands, the music that is in the air with the memory of what Hurricane Katrina brought.

The screen illustrates exactly the flow of time as suggested by the show. There is no beginning and no end (we'll ignore the little open space that serves as an entrance to allow visitors to experience the thing), and a spin around the imagery sends you back where you started, a kind of circular fever.

And yet, like so many of the best installations that have been in Mass MoCA over the years, "Below Sea Level" is more about being in a created space

and meditating on your moment there than trying too hard while you're inside it. It's nice just to sit there, watching and listening, while the screens around you provide a spanning array of the subject matter.

Panoramas are also a part of Chris Doyle's "Apocalypse Management" animation. On a lone screen in a huge spare room, Doyle's beautiful examination of destruction moves along a panorama as well, revealing the whole of a natural disaster that has torn apart a city. Within the landscape are the individual players in that end-of-the-world scenario, forever struggling to survive their predicaments.

Wojtasik and Doyle hold an observation in common that places their work as bookends to the show -- things fall down and people build them back up. There are plenty of different messages to be gleaned from this -- perhaps it's about the pluck of the human race and how adept it is at survival -- but at center should be the idea of destruction as an end of something and the birth of something else.

An elegy for modern times would be a constant babble -- what is modern is constantly changing with the passing of the now -- and the destruction of any physical place is a much more bombastic marker to the natural flow of time. Structures fall down; things change with the landscape.

Robert Taplin likens this dynamic to Dante's "Inferno" in his series of awe-inspiring dioramas, "Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante)." Taking the levels of Hell and shifting them into a contemporary setting, Taplin retraces the story in apocalyptic terms. Starting from ordinary American bedrooms and dining rooms, and stretching into multiple end of the world scenes, Taplin transitions into chilling urban scenarios that are reminiscent many end of the world flicks -- except somehow more nightmarish.

In his clever use of materials, Taplin echoes the dioramas many of us have encountered in natural history museums. Instead of representing the dawn of civilization -- some nice primitive tribe of cave dwellers -- he's focusing on the end of it. You don't see a lot of dioramas anymore -- they are an art form of science populism past that Taplin is using to bend tradition back on itself to reveal a speculative horror from times yet to come.

Other works meld the past and the present in more direct ways. George Bolster's "Reckoner" reformats religious iconography into a 21st century context, with a small, flashy chapel built around the sculpture of a narwhal and drawings of various weeping saints on the ceiling. No joke, the images actually cry real tears that you have to pass through.

Bolster's reinterpretation of religious superstars into modern context -- with Radiohead in the background, no less -- suggests the gods of old haven't evolved into any new spiritualism but are merely the celebrities of yesteryear. Religion -- a source of destructive behavior throughout history -- has passed through time in order to be stripped of its danger. Jesus, by Bolster's reckoning, might be no more dangerous in his newer context than any given hip-hop star. In this scenario, religion is the structure that has tumbled.

The show's location offers the final word on it. Mass MoCA, doomed to be a dilapidated building, hasn't tumbled at all. Like so many of the installations in "These Days: Elegies for Modern Times," past and future collided there to create something new -- it's just the way time flows.