

MARC STRAUS
NEW YORK

The Boston Globe

Two new installations at the deCordova



Jong Oh's "Between Two Rooms (Monochrome) #1" is one of two site-specific installations in "Sculpting With Air: Ian McMahon and Jong Oh."

By Cate McQuaid GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 01, 2018

MARC STRAUS

NEW YORK

LINCOLN -- Last month, Ian McMahon and Jong Oh spent time at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum installing tandem projects. At the end of a day's work, they were both exhausted — McMahon physically, and Oh mentally.

The site-specific installations in “Sculpting With Air: Ian McMahon and Jong Oh” — one vast, the other vanishing and spare — are on view through Sept. 30. Martina Tanga, the museum's Koch Curatorial Fellow, organized the show.

Immaterial, weightless, and formless, air is the antithesis of sculpture. But sculptors have been harnessing it for a century. Oh's and McMahon's installations belong in a lineage of air-reliant sculpture that encompasses Marcel Duchamp's tongue-in-cheek “50 cc of Paris Air” (a glass ampule), and Otto Piene's magical, sky-bound inflatables.

For his behemoth installation “Tether,” McMahon inflated and conjoined 24 giant bubbles of plastic. The artist prowled around inside the ensuing structure and blew plaster on the inner walls — a hot and sticky process accomplished in increasing darkness. It sounds like an initiation rite: McMahon grew sweatier and more enshrouded, and he finished the piece working by touch, because he could hardly see.

He let the plaster dry before peeling the plastic away. The 65-foot-long structure made of 5,750 pounds of plaster has walls an eighth of an inch thick. It bulges and swells over a steel corral.

The artist had a similar installation, “Sojourn,” at T+H Gallery in Boston two years ago. That piece, like this, had a living quality to it; over time it shifted and settled. It barely fit into the small gallery, skimming the ceiling. You knew it would never make it out the door.

Unfortunately, “Tether” doesn't overwhelm its space the way “Sojourn” did. It shares many other enticements, resembling an epic pillow fort. The seams pucker and stretch; the plaster bubbles loom up to 12 feet high. They crinkle, compress, fold, and bow; they're fleshly, and vaguely figurative.

A peephole in a steel door at one end of the structure reveals dim light filtering through the plaster walls, and the leviathan's delicacy.

Although “Sojourn,” was considerably smaller, its confinement gave it a dramatic twist. “Tether” while more a feat of mastery and endurance for

MARC STRAUS

NEW YORK

McMahon, is less at odds with its environment, and I found myself seeking that tension elsewhere. The door and peephole teased: What more was inside?

Surely, a work this fragile couldn't withstand such intrusion. But to follow the artist's experience making the piece, to be within such a delicate cavern, would add layers.

A critic can dream.

The play of fragility versus strength and size shows up in videos of some of McMahon's previous projects, as much performance as sculpture, in which the artist destroyed massive curtains of plaster with the swing of a rod. Kaboom! Gone in a puff of dust.

So it will be here: The artist will destroy "Tether," which is impossible to move. (The public is *not* invited to the demolition.)

Imminent destruction is inherent in Oh's installation, too. Unlike "Tether," Oh's installation, "Between Two Rooms (Monochrome) #1," materially occupies almost no space.

The artist spent days scrutinizing two adjoining galleries: the moldings, the imperfections in the walls, the air vents. He spotted a stray tuft in the dark gray carpet, and that's where he began. "Between Two Rooms" revolves around a black string suspended from the ceiling above that tuft.

Like the minimalist sculptor Fred Sandback, who delineated space with taut lengths of yarn, Oh draws, making straight lines and right angles with string. Like the anti-materialist Martin Creed, who won the 2001 Turner Prize for his aptly titled "Work No. 227: The lights going on and off" (in an empty gallery), he uses subtle manipulations to throw the viewer back on her heels.

Oh suspends a Plexiglass pane high in one room. He draws a second rectangle with string, making a right angle to the first: a transparent corner, half of it immaterial. His call-and-response with architectural elements leads viewers back and forth through the two spaces, finding harmonies and oddities, such as a stripe of paint that's the same color but slightly glossier than the rest of the wall.

MARC STRAUS

NEW YORK

It's an Easter egg hunt, with prizes at once mundane and magical. I passed my hand through one plane drawn with string, and giggled like a kid at a magic show.

Oh was born in Mauritania, and grew up in Spain and South Korea. McMahan is from upstate New York. Oh's installation sparks and calms the imagination like a Zen garden, helping to bring order to a viewer's mind. McMahan's spectacle — big, fragile, and full of hot air — is frothier and cartoonier. Dare I say, it's more American.

SCULPTING WITH AIR: Ian McMahan and Jong Oh

At deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, 51 Sandy Pond Road, Lincoln, through Sept. 30. 781-259-8355, www.decordova.org

This article was originally published on: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/2018/05/01/two-new-installations-decordova/MaVD5HiJqqb1UPtuwzZD0l/story.html>