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Artists in a Post-George Floyd, Mid-Pandemic World

Two new exhibitions at Mass MoCA created over the past year offer insights into our new normal.

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“Close to You,” an exhibition at Mass MoCA, gathers works that address the need to remake connections. Maren Hassinger’s “Love” includes pink bags filled with love notes — expressions of care when touch has been impossible. Credit: Will McLaughlin

Two shows that recently opened at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art are keyed to our new normal: One came into being during the most restrictive moments of the pandemic; the other, though long planned, shifted its focus as these past, momentous months unfolded. Conceptually, both address the questions — personal and political — that are on many minds at the moment.

‘Close to You’

This exhibition is a balm after a year in which so many had to learn how to maintain connections with loved ones in new, unfamiliar ways. In the early months of the pandemic, Nolan Jimbo, a graduate student in art history at nearby Williams College, selected six artists of color, many of whom are queer, whose work reflects on bonds of kinship and family, and on ways that those bonds can be created and nurtured across distances of time and space. They are Laura Aguilar, Chloë Bass, Maren Hassinger, Eamon Ore-Giron, Clifford Prince King and Kang Seung Lee.

Hassinger’s “Love” (2008/2019) is a welcoming entry point to this small but tightly packed show. Pink plastic shopping bags, attached to the wall, are filled with love notes and “inflated with human breath,” functioning as expressions of care that can be experienced when touch is impossible.

A contrast is found in the photographs of King (whose work has also appeared in *The New York Times*). Called

“affirmations,” this series is about the subtleties of human contact. Two men dance in a kitchen; two figures kiss under a sheet as a light illuminates their makeshift tent from within; three men braid one another’s hair and smoke weed on a bed; others embrace the trunks of palm trees. These members of King’s inner circle seem to speak a secret language of touch to which the viewer is not entirely privy.

In other work on view, the notion of connection is more abstract. Laura Aguilar, the Chicana artist who died in 2018, photographed her queer, fat body in a landscape because she felt accepted by nature in ways she did not by other people; gelatin silver prints from her 1999 series “Stillness” are haunting and intimate.



On the wall, from left: Chloë Bass's "#sky, #nofilter"; Kang Seung Lee's "Garden"; Laura Aguilar's photographs. In the foreground is Lee's "Untitled (List)," 24-karat thread on Sambe, hemp rope, wood. Credit:Will McLaughlin

The video, prints and poster that make up Bass's "#sky #nofilter" (2016-17) poetically suggest that our shared experiences — among our families, our friends, our political comrades — may not in fact be as communal as we imagine. Using a series of images of the sky, shot with an iPhone camera, Bass points out that even the most basic of statements ("the sky is blue") must be examined in the face of our deeply individual responses to the world.

Lee creates imaginary genealogies of queerness. In his video, "Garden" (2018), for example, he imagines a kinship between the Korean writer Joon-soo Oh and the English filmmaker Derek Jarman — two people who did not know each other but whose work is meaningful to Lee himself. Lee digs holes in Namsan Park, a gay cruising spot in Seoul that Oh frequented, and in Jarman's garden in Kent; into each hole he drops half of a drawing, connecting the two on a subterranean level.