Artistic Capital

In Liz Glynn’s massive installations, big questions about the meaning of value by Samantha Culp

For some artists, MASS MoCA’s iconic Building Five would be a daunting space to fill. The length of a football field, the 30,000 square-foot former textile mill is the nation’s largest free-standing gallery, and the centerpiece of one of its most prestigious museums. But for Liz Glynn ’03, a Boston-born, Los Angeles-based artist known for ambitious projects like attempting to literally rebuild Rome in a day, it was the ideal setting for a new work.

“I saw MASS MoCA for the first time when I was 19,” Glynn says. “It was the place that made me want to make sculpture.” In late 2017, she became the youngest artist to take on the space with the exhibition “The Archaeology of Another Possible Future” (now extended through early 2019). It’s a sprawling landscape of shipping containers, reclaimed forklift pallets, 3-D printers, industrial felt, glazed stoneware, vinyl records, and towering pyramids in the shape of economic charts. The piece interrogates the notion of progress itself, and particularly the American dream as it interweaves with the history of material production and consumption. Increasingly, financial value arises from high-speed, algorithmic trading—not on the physical factory floor, like Building Five once was—and Glynn’s installation asks, “Where does real value exist?” And what does the answer to that question mean for a society that is perhaps more unequal than ever before?

Glynn’s practice, which spans sculpture and performance, has always given shape to abstract systems. Her interests in class, labor, and its divisions began in her youth, growing up in Boston’s South Shore suburbs with an architect mother and engineer father. “My father’s family identified as blue-collar, my mother’s a bit more upper middle class, but they were from the same town,” she says, recalling how she first realized class differences could almost be an “arbitrary distinction” within a shared geography.

She considered becoming an architect or photojournalist, which led her to Harvard, where legendary photographer Nan Goldin was then teaching. Glynn also drew inspiration from fields like economics (her freshman year, she took Ec 10 from Baker professor of economics Martin Feldstein), while concentrating in visual and environmental studies. She attributes her even-
tual focus on art to her love of making room for the unexpected in a project. “I always like to leave about 10 percent of something up to chance,” she explains. “While great designers will sort of ‘complete the box’—for me, something needs to change along the way... or what’s the point of actually executing it?”

After stints in Berlin and New York City, Glynn moved to California to do her M.F.A. at CalArts. Like many young artists, she had juggled demanding day jobs (many in arts administration) with long nights in the studio, and prided herself on her stamina. The CalArts program was a culture shock: it prized strong concept above sheer labor. “It almost threw me off my chair,” she says, laughing. “It’s like the only thing I had taught myself to do was work—but now there were people saying, ‘Go take a drive and think.’ Like, what?”

One of those people was the late, beloved teacher and 1960s conceptualist Michael Asher, whose critique sessions often lasted up to 16 hours. Glynn was then making a lot of work about “utopia,” and the discussions always seemed to lead back to the idea that all utopias failed. Her frustrations with these critiques led to the “24 Hour Roman Reconstruction Project,” first staged in 2008 at the artist-run space Machine Project, in Los Angeles, and later reprised at other venues. Each time, Glynn and a team of volunteers would create the ancient capital at room size from cardboard and scrap materials, in historical order—then destroy it. “It was a meditation on loss,” she says. This absurdist yet reverent take on history can be seen in her subsequent projects, which continued to scale up. In 2014, “Ransom Room” reimagined the gold treasures used to ransom the Incan emperor Atahualpa from Spanish conquistadors—but in her rendering, the treasures were lost-wax castings, brought by the artist herself from far corners of all five boroughs to replenish the room on a weekly basis. All objects were eventually melted down, again reflecting on the dichotomy of symbolic and functional wealth. “At the time, the gold had no monetary value to the Inca themselves; it was only ritual and ceremonial,” Glynn explains. “The Spanish just saw dollar signs and the need to pay for the conquest, and so they took all these artifacts and melted them down.” In 2017, “Open House,” sup-
ported by the Public Art Fund, created the ghostly ruin of a Gilded Age ballroom in Central Park, with lavish Beaux Arts furniture cast in gray concrete. The sofas, chairs, and footstools were modeled after real pieces from a now-demolished Fifth Avenue mansion, evoking a history of the disembodied capital that lives on today in cities like New York. Finally, her MASS MoCA show tackles these subjects on a grand canvas—though perhaps even the bounds of a 30,000-square-foot museum can no longer contain the scope of her ideas.

Glynn is completing a commission for the San Francisco airport: a massive sculpture suspended above the security checkpoints that will reflect on the venue as a hub of connectivity. She’s also been working on a few projects in the desert outside Los Angeles: a replica of Nero’s villa that will be constantly expanding and renovating, never complete; and a sculpture of a toppled triumphal arch called “One Over,” to premiere during 2019’s Desert X art festival. “It will look as if it were just excavated, but it’s a monument to the defeat of the idea of winning itself,” she says. The work is related to the current political moment but also to the culture of ambition and competition in the arts and other fields. “I’m someone with ambitions but also see the darker side of that,” Glynn says—yet the artist, who continues teaching at UC Irvine’s art school, still has deep belief in the potential of art.

“I think one of the most powerful things about art is that you can propose these ideas that are not practical, but they’re a way of creating space for asking questions,” she says. “For me, that’s what makes it really important to keep working in that space and to try to create work that really pushes the what if.”

**“Here and Then Gone”**

*Bess Wohl writes plays from an actor’s perspective.*

*by Ilydialyle Gibson*

In playwright Bess Wohl’s work—sweet and sharp and sad, and often darkly funny—something important is usually missing. In *American Hero*, it is the owner of a new sandwich franchise who mysteriously disappears, leaving his employees to drift between existential hope and despair. In *Make Believe*, the void left by their absent parents causes four young siblings, latchkey kids of the 1980s, to dream up fantasy worlds together in the attic of their home.

“There seems to always be some authority figure who should be there and is not,” says Wohl ’96. “Somebody who should be in charge but is absent, or inaccessible.” That’s true also of her best-known work, 2015’s *Small Mouth Sounds*, in which six strangers in search of inner peace find their way to a silent retreat deep in the woods. With a running time of 100 minutes, *Small Mouth Sounds* contains very little dialogue, and the audience is left to feel the void left by their absent caretaker in the title role. It left a deep impression. When Duncan flew out over the audience at the end of the play, “I was completely blown away....I didn’t know you could do anything like that.” Wohl wrote a fan letter to Duncan, who wrote back, enclosing a photo of herself as a flapper in a beaded headdress. “I have that picture framed to this day,” Wohl says. “As an actor, I always put Sandy up in my dressing room.”

An English concentrator, Wohl joined the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club and acted in several plays—appearing onstage as a television reporter, a sappy lover, one half of a married couple from Utah—and enrolled in Marjorie Garber’s two-semester course on Shakespeare. Garber, the Kenan professor of English and visual and environmental studies, “really instilled in me this idea that the theater can help you live your life,” Wohl says: “that the things you encounter in plays can become almost like a manual.”

After college, Wohl returned to New York, and while she was studying acting at the Actors Studio, she started sending out her work. “I really didn’t have any expectations,” she says. “I actually mean observe….By stripping away loads of dialogue, Bess makes us more open and attuned to details.”

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