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Grown-Up Art, but It's Still Playtime

A children’s museum shelves the traditional hands-on rule so that kids can be kids.

By LAUREL GREATER

On a recent visit to an exhibition, I broke what is usually a museum’s most immutable rule: I touched the art.

No shock-octagonal plates stopped me or moved away the many patrons who were doing the same. Granted, this was the Children’s Museum of Manhattan. But unlike many displays for the young, this one, “Inside Art,” features works by 11 adults whose resume include the Jewish Museum, El Museo del Barrio and the Whitney.

The show’s visitors encounter art “not as a child but of pretending to be an adult,” said Leticia Buscaglia, the museum’s deputy director of education and exhibitions, but “running around like a child.”

Run around they do. Join Minaya’s “Spander Installation #6 (Labyrinth).” It invites the curious into a vibrantly printed fabric maze. “Up & Around,” a cluster of large cylinders suspended vertically by the duo Yuki & Chot, beckons museumgoers to stand inside each tube and experience bursts of color and pattern. Adriana Eiko Tavera’s “Fera Sopha” is a beguiling mesh canopy resembling tropical leaves.

The new exhibition on a museum tradition began in 2002, when “Inside Art” featured the work of the artists Elizabeth Murray, Fred Wilson and William Wegman. Children played with models of that art but not the art itself. In 2018, “Art, Artists & You” allowed them to work with resident artists, but not to handle the pieces in the show.

“We knew this next exhibit needed to be something kids could physically engage with and aesthetically engage with,” said David Ross, the museum’s director of public programs and curator of “Inside Art.”

Much of the work was commissioned, but one piece came almost uninvited from its appearance at an art center in Baltimore. That installation, Julie Ann Nagle’s “Slaughter Underwood: Interspecies Burrow,” is based on a gnomonia of bacteria.

Modeled of bird and wasp nests, rattan and other materials, the crawl-in burrow contains small felt sculptures of soil bacteria. “I wanted to make a piece about empathy with nature,” said Ms. Nagle, whose installation includes a video of the groundhog’s habitat. “We are the same. We have the same feelings.”

Tamara Kostianovsky contributed a handmade version of one of her signature tree stump sculptures of recycled fabric. Carlos Jesus Martinez Dominguez did a graffiti mural in which kids can search for all seven variations of his name.

The only work is under glass: Ohad Tzuri’s “Limitless,” a series of portraits of extraordinary American women, from Sojourner Truth to Abba Wambach, and Roberto Vivanco’s “Rainbow Assembly,” a sculpture of laser-cut acrylic that could inspire little hands. (The offering is a cardboard verity for visitors to assemble.)

The work gets “well loved,” Ms. Buscaglia said, which means that its creators have to live near enough to repair damage. But the museum also knew they could lead public programs. A multicultural group, they’ve been charged with forming a neighborhood within the museum, not just as demographics would define it, but as a place to be.

That means “not just artwork you can crawl through,” Mr. Ross said. “It’s a world they’re making art in the same space, we’re having dialogue in the same space, and eventually we’ll start to have performances.” Bemelman’s “Boys’ Sanctuary,” an artificial hive built of plastic debris, is itself a neighborhood project, made with fellow Bronx residents.

Visitors to “Inside Art” have stations to make their own work and can collaborate with three other artists who have studios within the space. Dennis Ortiz, who describes his work as centered on light and how we create it, will emit families in an installation that includes light bulbs they paint to express their identities. Nancy Sa- lime and Patricia Casasola, a stand-and-piece team, will work with children on “The Shape of My Food,” a sculptural installation connected not only to the joy of eating but also, Ms. Casasola said, to subjects like land use and migrants’ rights.

Mr. Ross wanted children to be exposed to the participating artists’ philosophies and activism. For the exhibition labels, the artists “were challenged to write about their work, so as they were explaining it to a 5-year-old,” he said. The museum added questions: “Would you tell your best friend?” “What do you find beautiful?”

The description of Damien Davis’s “Little Penny Collector,” a huge, seemingly abstract wooden jigsaw puzzle, does not tell all. The label does note that the work was inspired by a 5-year-old boy “who would walk around his neighborhood looking for pennies.” What does not say is that the child is George Monroe, a survivor of the brutal 1921 massacre in Tulsa, Okla., where white mobs, some with aerial bombs, murdered hundreds of black residents. Visitors encounter the work as an invitation to work and imagine for coins and an airplane.

But if “Inside Art” serves its purpose, the show will start children on an evolving journey. “Maybe in 10 years,” Mr. Ross said, “they’ll see other work of mine and be tempted to dig deeper.”

8 More Things to Do During School Break

CELEBRATE BLACK HISTORY: ROOTED IN PLANTS AT THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN (Through March 1). This African journey begins in the Bronx, where visitors to the Everet Children’s Adventure Garden can investigate the continent’s plants, practice a Nigerian dyeing technique and make a botanical journal like George Washington Carver’s. 718-817-8700.

FATHER-DaUGHTER WEST AFRICAN DANCE AT THE JOAN WEILL CENTER FOR DANCE (Saturday, 5:30 p.m.). What better way to celebrate Valentine’s Day than by dancing with Dad? Imani Fayne will lead this Alley Extension workshop, open to girls 8 and older. 718-620-5000.

IMAGINATION STUDIO: MARBLE RUNS AND CRAFTY MAZES AT THE STATEN ISLAND MUSEUM. (Wednesday, Feb. 26, 1-3 p.m.). Children can find ingenious cases for markery and their minds — as they design and build intricate wooden structures in this drop-in program. 718-548-1100.

JUNIOR MAKERS STAYCATION: FORAGING, FIBERS & FOOD AT THE QUEENS COUNTY PARK MUSEUM. (Wednesday, Feb. 26, noon-3 p.m.). You’ll never know you’re in Brooklyn at this event, which introduces children to traditional activities like foraging, buttering and spinning wool. Sign up for one day or all three. 718-595-3300.

LUNAR NEW YEAR: YEAR OF THE RAT AT THE PROSPECT PARK ZOO (February weekends, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.). Discover one of the oldest rodent complexes in the Eurasian harvest mouse. This celebration also includes a scavenger hunt geared to Chinese zodiac animals. 718-595-7339.

SUPERPOWERED METROPOLIS EARLY LEARNING CENTER: AT THE CHILDREN’S MUSEUM OF MANHATTAN. (The turf is open-ended). Another new show, this is all about power to preschoolers, with learning exhibits that unfold in a comic book-style environment. 718-731-2121.

TANGO DANCING CINDERELLA: ICONIC DANCERS AT TEATO SEA. (Saturday and Feb. 22 and March 1 and 7, 3 p.m.). Don’t expect any waltzing at that all-important ball. This bilingual production turns Cinderella into a spirited Latina. 718-997-1665.

"YETI, SET, SNOW!: AT THE SWEDISH COTTAGE MARINER TIC THEATER (through Feb. 23). The Abominable Snowman isn’t so abominable — in fact, he’s pretty sweet — in this salute to the company’s mascots. 212-393-1997.

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