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Grown-Up Art, but It's Still Playtime

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

By LAUREL GRAEBER

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

No shocked guards stopped me or shooed away the many smaller 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 work by 11 adults whose résumés include the Jewish Museum, El Museo del Barrio and the Whitney.

The show lets visitors encounter art "not as a child sort of pretending to be an adult," said Leslie Bushara, the museum's deputy director of education and exhibitions, but "running around like a child."

Run around they do. Joiro Minaya's "Spandex Installation #6 (Labyrinth)" invites the curious into a vibrantly printed fabric maze. "Up & Around," a cluster of large cylinders suspended vertically by the duo Yehu & Chat, beckons museumgoers to stand inside each tube and experience bursts of color and pattern. Adrienne Elise Tarver's "Fera Septa" is a beguiling mesh canopy resembling tropical leaves.

The new exhibition expands on a museum tradition begun in 2002, when "Art Inside Out" 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 Rios, the museum's director of public programs and curator of "Inside Art."

Much of the work was commissioned, but one piece came almost unaltered from its appearance at an art center in Baltimore. That installation, Julie Ann Nagle's "Slumber Underground: Interspecies Burrow," is based on scans of a groundhog's tunnels. Made of bird and wasp nests, rattan and other materials, the crawl-in burrow contains small felt sculptures of soil bacteria.

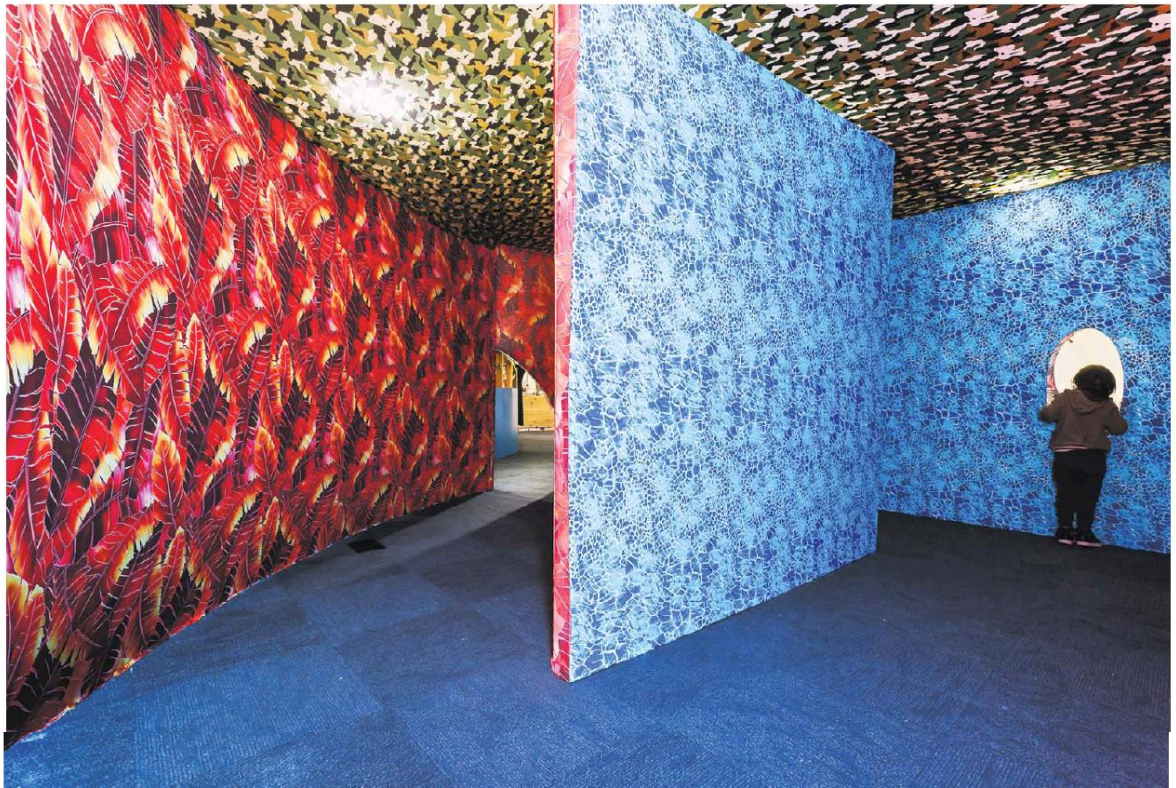
"I wanted to make a piece about empathy with nature," said Ms. Nagle, whose installation includes a video of the groundhog's habitat. (You even glimpse the furry critter.)

Tamara Kostianovsky contributed a hands-on 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.

Only two works are under glass: Leah Tinari's "Limitless," a series of portraits of extraordinary American women, from Sojourner Truth to Abby Wambach, and Roberto Visani's "Rainbow Assembly," a sculpture of laser-cut acrylic that could injure little hands. (The show offers a cardboard version for visitors to assemble.)

The work gets "well loved," Ms. Bushara said, which means that its creators have to live near enough to repair damage. But the museum also chose local artists so they could lead public programs. A multicultural group, they have been charged with forming a neighborhood within the museum, not just as demographers would define it, but as Mister Rogers would have, too.

That means "not just artwork you can crawl through," Mr. Rios said, "but you're making art in the same space, we're having dialogue in the same space, and eventually



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANUARY STEWART



Top, inside Joiro Minaya's "Spandex Installation #6 (Labyrinth)." The maze is made of stretch fabric printed in tropical patterns that allude to the Caribbean's complex history. Above, Julie Ann Nagle's "Slumber Underground: Interspecies Burrow" was inspired by a groundhog's habitat on her parents' rural property.

we'll start to have performances." Borinquen Gallo's "Be(e) 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. Dionis Ortiz, who describes his work as centered on "light and how we create it," will enlist families in an

Inside Art

An open-ended run at the Children's Museum of Manhattan; [212-721-1223](tel:212-721-1223), cmom.org.

installation that includes light bulbs they paint to express their identities. Nancy Saleme and Patricia Cazorla, an aunt-and-niece 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. Cazorla said, to subjects like land use and migrants' rights.

Mr. Rios 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 as if they were explaining it to a 5-year-old," he said. The museum added questions: "When have you felt left out?" "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 it 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 innocuous-looking brain teaser whose cutouts evoke coins and an airplane.

But if "Inside Art" serves its purpose, the show will start children on an evolving journey. "Maybe 10 years later," Mr. Davis 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 Everett 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](tel:718-817-8700), nybg.org.

FATHER-DAUGHTER WEST AFRICAN DANCE AT THE JOAN WEILL CENTER FOR DANCE (Saturday, 5-6:30 p.m.). What better way to follow Valentine's Day than by dancing with Dad? Imani Faye will lead this Ailey Extension workshop, open to girls 8 and older. [212-405-9000](tel:212-405-9000), aileyextension.com.

IMAGINATION STUDIO: MARBLE RUNS AND CRAZY MAZES AT THE STATEN ISLAND MUSEUM (Wednesday-Feb. 21, 1-3 p.m.). Children can find ingenious uses for marbles — and their minds — as they design and build intricate wooden structures in this drop-in program. [718-727-1135](tel:718-727-1135), statenislndmuseum.org.

JUNIOR MAKERS STAYCATION: FORAGING, FIBERS & FOOD AT THE QUEENS COUNTY FARM MUSEUM (Wednesday-Feb. 21, noon-3 p.m.). You'll never know you're in New York City at this event, which introduces children to old-fashioned activities like churning butter and spinning wool. Sign up for one day or all three. [718-347-3276](tel:718-347-3276), queensfarm.org.

LUNAR NEW YEAR: YEAR OF THE RAT AT THE PROSPECT PARK ZOO (February weekends, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.). Discover one of the littler rodents in Brooklyn: the Eurasian harvest mouse. This celebration also includes a scavenger hunt geared to Chinese zodiac animals. [718-399-7339](tel:718-399-7339), prospectparkzoo.com.

'SUPERPOWERED METROPOLIS EARLY LEARNING CITY' AT THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF MANHATTAN (the run is open-ended). Another new show, this is all about power to preschoolers, with learning exhibits that unfold in a comic-book-style environment. [212-721-1223](tel:212-721-1223), cmom.org.

'A TANGO-DANCING CINDERELLA/CENICIENTA TANGUERA' AT TEATRO 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. [212-529-1545](tel:212-529-1545), teatrosea.org.

'YETI, SET, SNOW!' AT THE SWEDISH COTTAGE MARIONETTE THEATER (through Feb. 23). The Abominable Snowman isn't so abominable — in fact, he's pretty sweet — in this salute to winter from the company's marionettes. [212-639-1697](tel:212-639-1697), cityparkfoundation.org.