

ART REVIEW

At Mass MoCA, finding hope amid the ruins of Ledelle Moe's 'When'

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 7, 2021, 12:20 p.m.



Ledelle Moe's "Memorial (Collapse)" at Mass MoCA. KAELAN BURKETT/COURTESY MASS MOCA

NORTH ADAMS — Ledelle's Moe's installation in the biggest of Mass MoCA's many big galleries is called "When." In the wildly convulsive year-and-a-bit the work has been here, maybe the name would do better with a question mark tacked on. It opened late fall 2019, before the pandemic was even a distant worry; shut down mid-March, as coronavirus anxieties first peaked; reopened in summer to a country convulsed by protest around the murder of Black Americans by law enforcement; endured the fall, as COVID cases ballooned; and will close, finally, four days after Joe Biden and Kamala Harris are inaugurated on Jan. 20. In this year that's felt like a century, it still seems like a lifetime. I mean, just look at *this* week.

I'm thinking about time because, as I'm writing this, it's late Wednesday night. [Four people died today while storming the US Capitol in Washington, D.C.](#), part of a right-wing mob goaded into violence by the president himself. Today alone has felt like a month; the days to come between now and Jan. 20 feel impossibly long, the end unimaginably distant. I was going to write about something else this week; "When" has grabbed and held me so many times this year,

but its long run over this erratic year always meant something else felt more urgent, present, *now*. Not today. “When” does that thing that only the best art can do: remain constant while the world wobbles in shaky orbit, revealing something new with every lurch. Today, staggered and numb, I needed it.

“When” is serene but ominous; still but unsettling. It’s vast, installed in an airplane hangar-like space, double-height and lined with big industrial windows that, on the right day at the right time, stream golden sunlight onto the work’s stone-gray surfaces.



A view of the "Ledelle Moe: When" installation at Mass MoCA. KAE LAN BURKETT/COURTESY MASS MOCA

“When” has presence, like the ruins of an ancient temple, the tumble-down idols of some lost civilization strewn in a loose maze across the gallery floor. It unmoors; it feels contemporary, primeval, or even alien, the product of a faraway apocalyptic future. The first time I saw it, last January, with the warm sun falling across the prone figures and glinting off the gallery floor, it felt almost holy, a communion with ancient spirits. The next time, masked in peak summer with the windows cracked open for optimal COVID neutralization, the installation carried the weight of a social order straining to topple old monuments for something new to grow. By fall, it just felt like dissolution, the aftermath of spiraling failure, a great unwinding destined for dust.

Moe made many of the works here separately, with different, connected purposes. A South African, she’s long wrestled with the heavy freight of monuments, a colonial convention most often installed to affirm power. “Erosion,” a 2009 series of stiff female forms, suggest toppled Victorian statues of ruling monarchs, while 2005’s “Memorial (Collapse),” with giant male heads resting on their sides, was made as tribute to victims of violent conflict.



Ledelle Moe's "Erosion" at Mass MoCA. KAE LAN BURKETT/COURTESY MASS MOCA

They are strewn out on the expanse of concrete floor here. Space affords the luxury of a singular display, which is the installation at its best. Separated by years, the works are united in aesthetic and resonance. Your mind will naturally knit them together, a singular experience, which is where the power of "When" resides: In its contemplative, unified stillness, with its massive prone figures in deathly repose. It is, I dare say, a sense of continuity; one thing falls, and another grows.

As you navigate its loose maze of forms splayed like giant sarcophagi, you reach a towering figure, kneeling (a new work, made for this very show). A swarm of jagged shards fleck the space around her, suspended in midair, as though in a rough act of becoming. Next to the stillness of the figures in repose nearby, she's radiant, vibrant — the ruins come to life, death itself in question.



A view of the "Ledelle Moe: When" installation at Mass MoCA. KAELAN BURKETT/COURTESY MASS MOCA

Today, in the middle of an awful week with the promise of more awful to come, I thought of the words of William Faulkner: "The past is never dead. It's not even past," he wrote in the 1951 novel "Requiem for a Nun," about a woman coming to terms with a life broken by violence and despair. The resolution, if you want to call it that, is a lesson in the virtue of suffering. (Faulkner, you may know, wasn't much for happy endings.)

On a day when the worst of us showed themselves, with Confederate flags and slogans and violence that confirmed their allegiance to an ugly history that refuses to die, it was a message that resonated. Faulkner elided happy endings partly because of his own enduring misery, but also because of their broader falseness. But he didn't exclude hope, either. On a wall near the rising figure, a constellation of stony faces cluster, a chorus witness to the drama unfolding. Isn't that what it's all about, really? We are here to witness, together. We are here to endure, together. And in the ruins, we are here to find peace, and build anew, however many times it takes. "When," to me, is really "When?" The answer is, not soon enough.

LEDELLE MOE: WHEN

Through Jan. 24, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams. 413-662-2111, www.massmoca.org



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