

MoCA Kidspace Exhibit Geared To Pique 'Curiosity'

By Stephen Dravis

Special to iBerkshires.com

11:07PM / Monday, July 02, 2012

NORTH ADAMS, Mass. — Before putting together the latest exhibition at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art's Kidspace, Laura Thompson did her homework ... by checking in with someone well acquainted with homework.

"Actually, I have to say that this exhibition is an homage to my 7-year-old son's interests," Thompson said about "Curiosity," the installation that opened Saturday, June 23, in the children's area of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

"Jacob is really curious about 'Star Wars.' That's all he wants to talk about."

And when Thompson was talking with artist **Nathan Sawaya** about his contribution to the summerlong show, Jacob's name came up ... so did Han Solo's.

"I did get a specific request from Mass MoCA," Sawaya said in a recent telephone interview. "They asked if I could do something Star Wars-related. I think it was Laura Thompson's son who saw something on my website and said, 'You have to get that Star Wars piece.' It's a life-sized Han Solo frozen in carbonite."

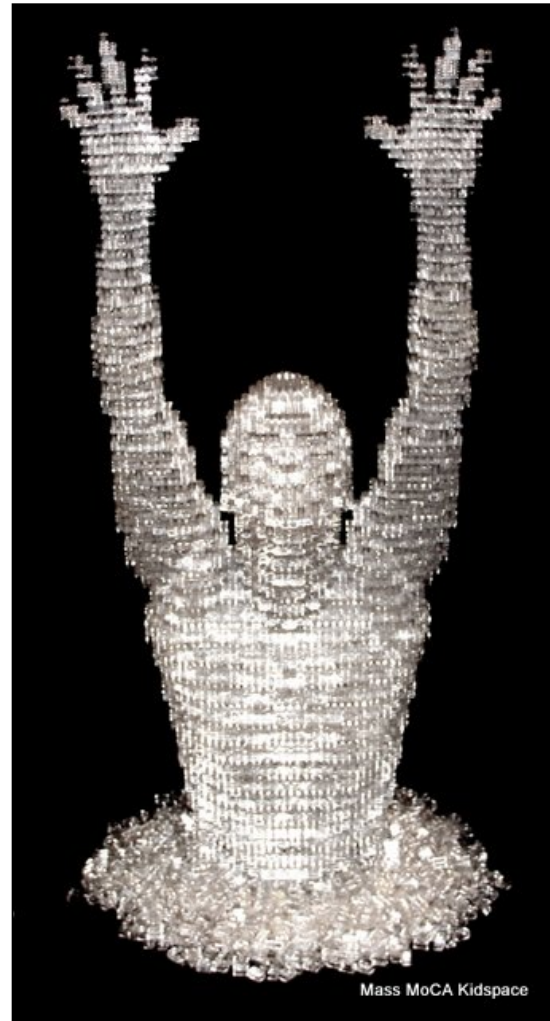
The sculpture, like all of Sawaya's recent work, was constructed out of Lego building blocks, a fitting medium for an exhibit at Kidspace, the area of Mass MoCA dedicated to shows and educational programs for elementary and middle school students, teachers and families.

"Curiosity" includes work from nine internationally acclaimed artists, from Adams' Ephraim and Sadie Hatfield to Toronto's Alex McLeod to Edinburgh, Scotland's Muir Vidler.

Each, like Sawaya, will encourage "viewers to indulge their urge to investigate," according to the Kidspace website.

Although "Curiosity" appears to lack the thematic coherence of Kidspace's last offering, "Under the Sea," Thompson said works in the new exhibit do have a common thread.

"It is thematic in that we're dealing with the idea of curiosity," Thompson said. "It's not a tangible thing like 'Under the Sea.' But we're looking at the word 'curiosity' in two different ways.



Nathan Sawaya elevates the ubiquitous Lego to fine art in 'Curiosity,' the summerlong exhibit at Kidspace.

"First: Curiosity is an innate skill of children. We wanted to look at things they're curious about and have discussions about why this spurs curiosity in them and spur that innate sense of wonder."

That is where items like Sawaya's Lego homage to "The Empire Strikes Back" or San Francisco artist **Yoram Wolberger's** larger-than-life sculptures based on childhood toys come into play.

The other sense of the word "curiosity" has to do with Mass MoCA's predecessors.

"The other piece the social history and context of curiosities and turn of the (20th) century museums that were chock full of fine art, natural history, oddities," Thompson said.

"The objects we chose to display are things that kids are naturally inclined to be curious about: dinosaurs, cowboys, superheroes, ninjas, a giant blue (toy) cowboy — sort of a hodgepodge like it would be in one of those old-time museums."



Old-time subjects are given new perspective using old-time building blocks.

While all the art at Mass MoCA is new, "Curiosity" will include four works by Sawaya, who incorporates the "old-time" building blocks in a new way. Among his past works are a 20-foot Tyrannosaurus rex and a 53-foot advertising billboard that used more than 500,000 blocks.

While Sawaya's work is not strictly for children, he does have a strong fan base among young art lovers.

"I've had exhibitions all over the globe, and I try to make it out to every one, at least the opening," said Sawaya, who was too attend the opening at Mass MoCA. "I have a chance to interact with museum goers, and a lot of times it's the kids who approach me. We have these great dialogues about Legos.

"I was doing a presentation at the presidential library in Little Rock, Ark., and had a chance to meet President Bill Clinton. There were families at the event, and this kid came up while I was talking to the former president and asked if he could get a picture. President Clinton said of course, and the kid says, 'Not with you, with the Lego guy.'

"You know you've made it when that happens."

Sawaya does not work for Lego Group, the manufacturer of Legos, but as an attorney (he left that career for art about eight years ago), he understands trademark law and is cognizant of the manufacturer's concerns about how the product is used.

"When I first started doing this, we had a short dialogue," Sawaya said. "They were curious. My goal was to take Lego in a whole new direction. Let's take I out of the toy store and into the fine art world.

"I'm respectful of the brand and very respectful of the audience. I realize kids are going to be drawn into these museums. Although the themes are thought-provoking, I know to stay away from more 'adult' themes."

And he always hopes that his work can help fuel the imaginations of budding artists.

"I think that's one of the special things about it," he said. "Legos lend themselves to creativity and exploring our own ideas and imagination.

"Every child has an idea, and he or she has a chance to explore it with Lego. It's accessible to them. If they go to a museum and see a marble statue, they can appreciate that. But they don't go home

and find a block of marble in their living room."

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