



# In Boston, Altering the Artist-in-Residence Concept

By HILARIE M. SHEETS MARCH 19, 2014

COLLABORATIONS among museums and artists-in-residence typically culminate in a single artwork or event. More unusual is the one between Matthew Ritchie and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. During his 18-month residency, he is producing a series of related artworks and performances in and near the museum that weave Boston and the institute into an abstract narrative of past, present and future.

“I’ve never done a thing where I sort of seep into the fabric of the museum itself and the neighborhood around it, almost like an energy consultant coming in,” said Mr. Ritchie, 50. “But instead of talking about heat, it’s ideas.” The artist is known for his densely layered, expansive paintings and installations that diagram systems of religion, science, history and cosmologies, sometimes all at the same time.

“Matthew heard from us that we’re interested in activating more spaces in the museum and activating the museum in more spaces in the city,” said Jill Medvedow, director of the 78-year-old institute, who oversaw its relocation to the edge of Boston harbor in 2006 in a luminous glass building designed by the architectural firm Diller Scofidio & Renfro. “He took that and completely embraced it and has incorporated those goals of ours into these new works of his, which are all one big body of work.”

Leading the project is Jenelle Porter, senior curator at the contemporary art institute. She had seen Mr. Ritchie’s multimedia music production “The Long Count,” conceived with Bryce Dessner of the National, the indie rock band, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2009. Having worked with him before, she knew Mr. Ritchie’s penchant for collaborating across disciplines with musicians, scientists, architects and judges. “I thought it would be great to bring someone in

who has the skill set to work with a lot of different people in the museum,” Ms. Porter said, “but whose work also requires and desires that kind of collaboration.”

She initially proposed that Mr. Ritchie stage a version of “The Long Count” in the museum’s theater; paint a mural on the lobby’s Art Wall, and produce a project with the Teen Arts Council. “Visual arts, performing arts and education are the most important programming elements for the I.C.A.,” said Ms. Porter.

From there, Mr. Ritchie’s residency evolved to include an additional mural in Dewey Square, a park near the institute, and an additional performance with Mr. Dessner, all unfolding through the year. “I’m imagining moving people through time and having all these disparate moments understood as orbiting planets in a solar system,” said Mr. Ritchie, who has also donated a painting, “The Salt Pit,” on view now in the museum’s collection galleries.

Mr. Ritchie has just completed the lobby mural; it covers a 50-foot wall and extends across an adjacent stretch of windows. While the piece is abstract, it builds on visual themes in the Dewey Square mural, completed in September.

“On one level, this is the story of the beginning of time,” says Mr. Ritchie. A large atom form, or big bang, is exploding on the top right, with smaller atoms falling into a kind of primordial seascape. From the center arises a vessel-like form with dense scaffolding, suggesting the building of a complex society, which then begins to break down and return to a state of nature on the left.

Within this epic history, the artist suggests ideas of Boston and the institute as well. The shape of the vessel alludes to the ship where John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, quoted the Sermon on the Mount to migrants from England in 1630 as he envisioned the future “city upon a hill.”

“The I.C.A. is also the model of the shining city on a hill,” said Mr. Ritchie, “clearly designed as a lantern that glows at night and was embedded with ideas of the future at that moment it was built.” Mr. Ritchie said he thought of museums as ocean liners moving through history and preserving things. He is interested in how the opening of the art institute’s building spurred rapid redevelopment of the once-dilapidated waterfront, with hotels, office buildings and condominiums going up all around it (the mural on the institute windows, in fact, obscures a construction site directly outside).

On March 29, the next episode of Mr. Ritchie’s complex vision comes to life

in a performance that will begin in the museum lobby and conclude at a Roman Catholic chapel nearby, Our Lady of Good Voyage. Musicians on clarinet and guitar, including Mr. Dessner, will improvise a composition in front of the mural. When they proceed to the chapel, originally for seamen, the performance will develop into a choral work, with the vocalist singing Mr. Dessner's composition "To the Sea," accompanied by organ choir and imagery by Mr. Ritchie projected behind the altar.

It is meant to connect the innovative technological present, embodied by the museum and the contemporary art within it, to Boston's maritime and religious roots, as well as the shift in art to a largely aesthetic experience from its more spiritual role in the past. The artist noted that the chapel itself would soon be relocated from its prime location in the middle of the redevelopment district.

Since the beginning of the residency last fall, Mr. Ritchie has met regularly with members of the Teen Arts Council at the museum and prompted them to think like him. "He's directed us to take photographs of things in our day-to-day lives that might normally go unnoticed and connect them in this big photo map or web of overlapping concepts," said Cecelia Halle, a high school sophomore on the council, which recently received the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program award from Michelle Obama. "Ultimately, we're going to put these things into a video that documents the changing structure of Boston through the eyes of us teens." The collaborative project, which will make use of the museum's high-tech digital lab, will go on view this summer.

The artist has other surprises in store. He plans to embed an unannounced artwork somewhere in the museum later this year and is working with the bookstore about a way to provide an unexpected — and undefined — ghost text along with intended purchases. He's also created a series of short films, which set his vocabulary of abstracted imagery in motion and can be seen and heard via smartphone at the site of each artwork and performance. The residency will conclude with a reprise of "The Long Count" in the museum's theater in December.

"There are all these things swirling around each other and each person is going to be encouraged to solve it in a way," said Mr. Ritchie. "It's not about having a secret language but more to encourage exploration. Can you remember the mural you saw 15 minutes ago in Dewey Square when you walk into the lobby? Can you remember the performance you were at six months ago when

you're at another one that echoes it? Can these things have an algorithmic choral quality and build on each other not just in space but in time? It's the sense of a haunting."

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