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Art Reviews
By Sebastian Smee
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PETAH COYNE: *Everything That Rises Must Converge*
At: Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, through February.
www.massmoca.org



Living Large

Grand Installations at Mass MoCA and the Clark take advantage of gallery space to play with illusions of scale

...Petah Coyne's dark, glamorous, gothic, and exceptionally beautiful mid-career retrospective, "Everything That Rises Must Converge."

Coyne's sculptures are loaded with poetic allusions (the show's title is borrowed from a short story by Flannery O'Connor). But unlike the work of so many of her peers, they do not rely on outside emissaries of meaning: They generate a poetry that's all their own.

Coyne layers materials the way some artists trowel on paint. The first works one sees (also the most recent) are densely compacted but artfully arranged accumulations of wax and silk flowers, satin ribbons, black sand, flowing velvet, and taxidermy.

"Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)," the most arresting of them, is an apple tree coated in black sand. Its branches are weighed down by stuffed peacocks perched upright and pheasants hanging upside down.

The work is a complex homage to O'Connor, who loved peacocks and equated them with renewal and with the Catholic Church; to the artist's friend, the poet Leslie Scalapino; and to Nu Shu, an old Chinese writing technique used solely by women to express fear and loneliness. But the visual and sculptural richness of the piece is so overwhelming that trying to process such allusions is like trying to eat salad after a dessert of dense chocolate cake. It can't hurt, but it's sort of too late.

With the exception of her blurry, black-and-white photographs (look out for an extraordinary image of a crowd of Japanese monks running through a forest), all of Coyne's work is a bit like this: It can feel like too much. But I admired the fearlessness of her aesthetic, which is the absolute antithesis of minimalist cool...