

ARTnews

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Petah Coyne

MASS MoCA

North Adams, Massachusetts
Through February

Teeming with flora and fauna, Petah Coyne's extravagant sculptures hang from the rafters and swell up from the floor here to transform the huge central gallery into an enchanted forest.

The centerpiece of this dark, fairy-tale-like milieu is *Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)*, 2009–10, a magnificent apple tree coated in black sand. Perched high on its silhouetted limbs are ten taxidermied peacocks, their heads alert and their plumage sweeping downward. Below them dangle black pheasants, upside down with wings splayed. Have the peacocks vanquished their foes or out-lived their partners? Stunning, disturbing, and ambiguous, the piece—like all of Coyne's sculptures—is pregnant with literary and personal allusions.

Curated by MASS MoCA's Denise Markonish, this 20-year survey is titled "Everything That Rises Must Converge" after a short story by Flannery O'Connor, who used peacocks as symbols of renewal. Fanning out from the tree are chandeliers and figural forms from recent years, coated thickly with animals, statuary, silk flowers, and other objects often entombed in black and purple wax. *Untitled #1180 (Beatrice)*, 2003–8, named for Dante's muse, rises up like a towering force of nature, with velvet draping her face, birds nose-diving into her swirling flower-encrusted robes, and black squirrels running down the sumptuous material.



Petah Coyne, *Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)*, 2009–10, mixed media, 13' 2" x 22' x 24'.
MASS MoCA.

Smaller galleries on one end of the space feature far more ominous sculptures from two decades ago that are linked to the more recent pieces in their black palette and organic shapes. *Untitled #670 (Black Heart)*, 1990, for example, a menacing, giant, saclike form covered in barbed wire and black sand, suggests alien gestation, malignancy, and primal fear.

At the other end are galleries showing Coyne's rarely exhibited black-and-white photographs, which she makes in place of drawings. Taken when both she and her subjects are in motion, these blurry studies show robed monks running in formation and women twirling in bridal gowns. While these modest tonal fragments seem a long distance from the baroque opulence of her sculptures, Coyne's work in both mediums investigates animation and transcendence. —Hilarie M. Sheets