

IS THIS NEW ART SPACE A MUSEUM? A STORE? BOTH?

BY CATHERINE WAGLEY

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2015 | 6 DAYS AGO



Emily Mast's *The Stage Is a Cage, Composition #1*, is the result of a performance at MaRS involving paint splattering.

Photo by Jason Barbagelott

Ink and primary-colored paint flew up and down paper-covered walls during artist Emily Mast's performance, *The Stage Is a Cage*, two weeks ago. The performance served as the preview for a new downtown gallery called Museum as Retail Space, or MaRS for short. Mast and dancer Jos McKain negotiated a colorful set in ways that seemed calculated even when absurd, such as when Mast started painting McKain's arm blue-green.

The dynamic between the two was sometimes parental, sometimes collegial but never quite erotic, even though McKain's clothing came on and off. A series of fast-paced outfit changes near the end was like a cryptic version of Sandra Boynton's decades-old children's book *Green Hat, Blue Hat*, the one in which an elephant, moose and bear put on primary-colored clothes properly and a turkey always gets it wrong: "red shirt, blue shirt, yellow shirt, oops."

By the time the performance finished, the stage was a mess of fabric, paper and dripping color. Mast – who has staged her rhythmic, rule-based work at LACMA and the Hammer Museum – introduced Robert Zin Stark, the owner-director of MaRS, who thanked the audience for coming. He's in his 30s, though he looks slightly younger, with strawberry blond hair, and he seems like a sensitive guy. So when he made a point to mention that anyone interested in purchasing the performance could find more information at the front desk, the sales pitch didn't quite match his demeanor.

The press release had specified that this would be Mast's "first commercially available performance," and even the program said, in italics near the bottom, "This program has an asset value, do not throw away." That last part had to be something of a joke, but the rest wasn't.

Four days later, the set was disassembled and divided into sections, rolls of paint-sprayed paper paired with props and fabric. Mast came to select these "compositions" herself the morning after the performance, and now they are individual works that can be sold and installed. The performance is separate; a collector who wanted to buy that would enter into a contractual agreement with Mast and would be able to request the performance again.

"Performance is a bigger responsibility in that way. If you're going to own it, are you ever going to have it be performed?" Stark asks.



Emily Mast's *The Stage Is a Cage, Composition #8*

Photo by Jason Barbagelott

Artists such as Mast often rely on support from institutions, but collectors do buy performances – in Pierre Huyghe's show currently at LACMA, the man who announces visitors' names at the entrance is a "work" owned by a Japanese collection.

"It's perceived as something that can be very difficult to sell," Stark says of performance art. "But I don't think it needs to be." It all has to do with framing and organization, he explains – the word "organize" is one he uses often. If you organize the presentation of a performance in a certain way, it can be seen as more of a "deliverable."

MaRS, which opens officially on Feb. 13 with a show by New York-based artist Raúl de Nieves, and takes an unusual approach to the intersection of art and commercialism. The entryway includes a store, called the Shop-o-MaRS, stocked with specially chosen art books and limited-edition prints. Visitors will climb the wide, concrete stairs from the store into the "sacrosanct" gallery space – "sacrosanct" is Stark's word.

Until a few months ago, Stark worked for high-end design dealers such as Twentieth and Alexandre Ferucci (MaRS' first press release describes him as a "sales wunderkind"). In 2013, he found his building, a 6,000-square-foot space beneath the Sixth Street Bridge, along a stretch of Anderson Street that Google Maps has a hard time locating.

Stark encountered the building as he walked by, then called the number on the for-sale sign and learned that it was being sold fast and cheap as part of divorce negotiations.

At that point, he didn't know the art space 356 Mission would be opening blocks away, that Nicodim Gallery would be relocating from Culver City to a building a few doors down or that the New York gallery Venus Over Manhattan would be opening an L.A. satellite on the same block. "Venus next to Mars," Stark says. "I don't think they knew, either."

Stark first thought of the "Museum as Retail" concept about three years ago, when he was fantasizing about curating a pop-up exhibition. "It's almost a vulgar thing to say," he explains. "I was thinking of the museum as something where things are perceived almost as sacred, as beyond us and priceless. Then, in our society, basically the polar opposite of that is retail. That's where almost everything can be touched and thrown around."

The only problem with those three words was that the acronym MAR didn't work, since people might think of its Spanish meaning, "sea." "I was going to bed one night, and I was, like, 'MARS,' that would make a great acronym," he recalls. "I tried to figure out what the 's' could be. Museum as retail shop? Museum as retail studio? Then I thought 'space.' Mars and space. That works."

When Stark was conceiving his space, he started using the term "consumer constructivism." He wanted his visitors to feel like potential consumers, who could "construct" their own experience with the art he exhibited. "In a way it's a little redundant," he says, "It's already describing what a lot of commercial galleries do, but it's highlighting the importance of participating by buying the work and supporting the artist."



Museum as Retail Space

Photos by Vijat Mohindra

He feels that high-end galleries have often presented themselves as elite spaces, where prices aren't listed and where only those "in the know" understand how to go about purchasing work. "It will seem like a collector is almost lucky to be able to buy work," Stark says. "It feels to me almost like an intentional disempowerment of that participant. I hope to be different. We want to be open to pretty much anyone who wants to be in love with what they're seeing."

He has to be, too, if he's going to make MaRS work, financially, with the kind of art he wants to exhibit. Right now, de Nieves, who drove a truck full of work from New York to L.A. in the last week of January, has odd, sequin-covered beings made of packing tape piled up and cascading out of a plastic bin near the back of the gallery, along with labyrinthine paintings inspired by the story of St. George laid out on the floor. The work is optimistically colorful and confessional, not cool and minimal like so much of the painting and sculpture currently thriving in the market.

It's in the main vaulted exhibition space, under lights that intentionally look like supermarket fluorescents but are actually much softer. Stark described that lighting choice in detail in his press release, and he is willing to discuss most mechanics in similar detail.

"Even here, we're in front of a window that lets you look into one of the gallery rooms from the outside," he says. "The whole thing with Museum as Retail Space is ultimately a really earnest candidness."

"Raul de Nieves: I'm in a Story," at *MaRS*, 649 S. Anderson St., dwntwn. Opening is Fri., Feb. 13, 7-10 p.m., exhibit runs through April 1. marsgallery.net

Catherine Wagley on Twitter

 **Follow @cgwagley** 1,014 followers

Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#):

 **Follow @laweeklyarts** 7,399 followers

