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A Baltimore Museum Becomes the Art Object

By KELLY CROW



Sarah Oppenheimer/The Baltimore Museum of Art; photograph by Mitro Hood

TOP DOWN: The work of Sarah Oppenheimer debuts at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Two years ago, New York artist Sarah Oppenheimer wandered into a round, 16th-century chapel in the courtyard of Rome's Church of Saint Peter in Montorio. While tourists marveled at the chapel's High Renaissance dome and colonnade, she fixated on a gratelike hole in its marble floor that was flooded with light pouring in from windows high overhead.

The top-down journey of that light in such a sacred space gave her the idea for an art project that is about to become the centerpiece of the Baltimore Museum of Art's renovated contemporary art wing, which reopens to the public Nov. 18. It is her first permanent museum installation.

Ms. Oppenheimer, age 40, is well known in contemporary-art circles for her elaborate, funhouse-style reconfigurations of existing architectural spaces. Four years ago, she cut a roughly 8-foot-long hole in the fourth floor of a Pittsburgh art space called the Mattress Factory and attached a wooden pipe-like structure beneath the hole that tunneled down and out the window of the floor below—allowing visitors at the top to peer directly at the grounds next door. She also built a huge, wedgelike aluminum structure at Houston's Rice University Art Gallery two years ago that appeared to slice through the gallery's glass-enclosed lobby before fanning out to rest on the floor beyond.

Her latest piece for Baltimore could be even more of a brainteaser. The museum's two-story contemporary wing, built in 1994, is attached to the rest of the institution by a corkscrew-shaped staircase that has its own mezzanine-like landing halfway up. In a nod to that Roman tomb, Ms. Oppenheimer cut openings into the walls and ceilings of the stairwell's three levels, then arranged panes of metal and reflective glass in the holes so that visitors can get varying, optical-illusion glimpses into whatever is happening on different levels.

The effect of the piece, "W-120301 x P-010100," is playful but disorienting. Walk into the wing's first floor and look up: A framed pane of glass on the ceiling will likely show people milling about an upper floor near a large Robert Motherwell abstract painting. If no one is nearby, the glass will reflect the Motherwell alone.

"Artists throughout history, from the Renaissance to cubism, have played with space and perspective in interesting ways," said Kristen Hileman, the Baltimore museum's curator of contemporary art, "but it's amazing the way Sarah collapses space in front of your eyes."

Long intrigued by complex infrastructures and systems, Ms. Oppenheimer said she liked the idea of thinking about space in a museum that was similarly rethinking its look and layout.

Growing up in Austin, she invented her own puzzles as a child and studied semiotics in college before embracing a life in art. Later on, she said she began following the research of behavioral scientists as well as artists like Hans Haacke, whose best-known projects involved researching the finances of major museum patrons. Ms. Oppenheimer's pieces straddle the fields of science and art as well.

Not all of Ms. Oppenheimer's ideas fly, though. Initially she suggested cutting into the staff bathroom at the Baltimore museum. But Ms. Hileman said the museum vetoed the idea: "Some divisions are still good."

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