

ART REVIEW

Everything's scary — but don't let it break you

Lily Cox-Richard's 'Weep Holes' at Mass MoCA meets a tense time with a measure of playfulness

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 9, 2022, 4:12 p.m.



A discarded mound of tinsel sits next to a pile of giant jacks made of wire tomato cages in "Lily Cox-Richard: Weep Holes" at Mass MoCA. TONY LUONG

NORTH ADAMS — Lily Cox-Richard's new exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art is called "Weep Holes," which can send the mind reeling to all kinds of unpleasant places. Allow me to let you off the hook: Weep holes, technically, are small

voids built into masonry to let buildings breathe, releasing moisture.

Cox-Richard offers a similar release, but of the emotional kind. “Weep Holes” is irreverently sympathetic, blowing off steam with gently absurd material gestures rippling with good humor. Like me, you might take some comfort in the poignant silliness of tomato cages — tall cones made of slim wire, either red or green — [kit-bashed](#) into what look like enormous star-shaped jacks that end up wedged in various nooks throughout the show.

But this is not gesture without intent. You might know jacks as a child’s game of another era loosely about cleaning up your own mess. There’s no time to lose: Scatter the jacks, then toss up the ball and snatch up some jacks in the scant moments before it falls back to ground. It seems like an apt metaphor for the general chaos of the pandemic and its multiplier effect on always-present political and social division; the past few years have felt a lot like trying to keep the ball in the air while the mess underneath rambled uncontrollably in every direction.

Cox-Richard’s tomato cage jacks are scattered too widely to imagine collecting them with anything resembling efficiency (Mass MoCA’s enormously high ceilings mean some sculptures placed at unreachable removes high overhead). The implied futility is intentionally comic, and therein, I think, lies the point: Nothing is ever perfect, especially now, so give yourself a break. But the show is less about futility than the value of keeping the struggle alive, and the collective work of redress and repair in an unendingly anxious moment in American life.



A 16-foot-tall broom will be recycled when the show "Lily Cox-Richard: Weep Holes" at Mass MoCA is over. TONY LUONG

“Weep holes,” like a lot of things in our pandemic-paused lives, has been a long time coming. Cox-Richards was first approached by Mass MoCA senior curator Denise Markonish in 2016, with the political landscape shading toward divisiveness and rage. By the year’s end, it had taken a darkly dramatic turn; the artist turned her mind to a future world better than the one that had begun to take shape — because what, in her mind, could be worse? — but with a catastrophic mess to clean up.

That takes direct shape in the 16-foot-tall broom that towers over one of the galleries here, its long gray tendrils snaking down to pool in a heap on the floor. There’s something inherently mirthful about it — muppet-like, in a whistle-while-you-work kind of way. But like everything else here, the piece is about more than appearances. Grab a handful of bristles — it’s fine; you’re allowed — and you’ll find them to be lengths of slim

cylindrical foam used as flexible spacers in building construction. The material has a circular lifecycle to answer a recycling enthusiast's dreams; it's the product of untold tons of cast-off plastics otherwise destined to be flash-frozen for millennia in landfills as toxic, useless trash. The artist herself is in on the act: When the show ends, the broom itself will be ground up and repurposed for the building trade.

The piece is an emblem of ingenuity and care, which is Cox-Richard's work in a nutshell. And while it can get a tad cutesy — in a video work, a drone fitted with dangling chandelier crystals surrenders its stealthiness to be sparkly and decorative instead — the show exudes empathy, the aesthetic equivalent of a warm hug. Semi-spherical fire pits are mounded in corners, all of them scorched by use; Cox-Richard hand-painted them and passed them out to friends during the pandemic to serve as outdoor gathering points when anything else felt too dangerous. Walls of sandbags, the kind used to hold back floodwaters, sprout fanciful organic-looking growths, their job elevated from protective to uplifting.



But a key element to the show isn't a sculptural gesture at all. It's just a thing. During a residency in Philadelphia, Cox-Richard happened on a dense bundle of Christmas tinsel — the scourge of recycling programs everywhere, pure shimmering trash — roughly the size of a lift-top freezer. Covered in years of accumulated filth and left outside, it had the shaggy appearance of a forlorn and injured beast (in the video, the sparkle drone hovers near the bundle in what you could almost describe as an attempt to make friends). After it rained, its whiskered, silvery hide would sparkle in the ensuing sun.

It was an opportunity too good to pass up. Cox-Richard adopted it, untouched; it sits in the gallery here just as it was abandoned outside in Philadelphia. It's the show's mascot, and the core of Cox-Richard's work. It tells us: There is beauty in the ruins, and light just below the surface for those willing to look closely, and work hard enough to coax it forth.

LILY COX-RICHARD: WEEP HOLES

Through January 2023. Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 1040 Mass MoCA Way, North Adams. 413-662-2111, www.massmoca.org.

Murray Whyte can be reached at murray.whyte@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@TheMurrayWhyte](https://twitter.com/TheMurrayWhyte).

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