

A CITY NEAR YOU

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

INVISIBLE CITIES

MASS MOCA, THROUGH FEB. 4, 2013

INVISIBLE CITIES AT MASS MOCA was inspired by Italo Calvino's 1972 novel of the same name, a work imagining Marco Polo's descriptions of fantastical cities upon his visit to Kublai Khan. In the novel, Calvino takes for granted that histories—like that of Marco Polo—are unreliable. The exhibition imagines the city as a layered place where history and dream converge.

All this is well and good, except the city-as-construct is old news. And at a time when so many real cities are in real peril because of political or natural disasters, the premise of *Invisible Cities* came off as a little indulgent, despite (or maybe because of?) all the heavily referenced, globally aware art. Even with some superior works here, by the end I yearned for art that confronted current events or centered on people.

One work that does incorporate the human figure is Diana Al-Hadid's *Nolli's Orders*. Made out of gypsum, fiberglass, wood and foam, Al-Hadid's pale structure has as its base a building with Venetian Gothic windows. But from there it rises—like Venice, built on a swamp—on filaments and papery overhangs from which bodies emerge, recumbent in ecstasy or decay. Spills of paint suggest volcanic activity or algae. Walk to another side of *Nolli's Orders* and you see another body that didn't seem to be there before.

Equally arresting is Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich's large-scale bamboo and rattan city, *Compound*. A study in contradictions, it is both a symmetrical skyline and a prison of suffocating, cage-like dwellings. Towers are like the missiles of American aggression, but they are grounded by humble materials.

Also not-to-miss is Miha

Strukelj's *Melting Pot*. Because the large drawing is connected to platforms and mounted on perpendicular walls, one feels one is walking into a real cityscape. In roughly dotted charcoal and graphite lines, Strukelj creates a ghostly scene of cranes and signs, towering buildings and windows that blink as if on a computer screen. Tape and blank areas, where, in one instance, the artist has written "Dislocated Human," are the violent erasures played out in places like the artist's native Ljubljana, Slovenia, as well as Brooklyn, Manama, and perhaps, the work suggests, a city near you.

Cycles of construction and destruction are also cleverly evoked by Francesco Simeti's imaginative *La citta d'oro* (*City of Gold*), which is wallpaper, of all things. If you've looked at any wallpaper samples lately, you know the patterns are a repository of colonialist decorative tics (the palm tree, the pineapple, chinoiserie). Simeti mines this trove using media and other images to create a large-scale,

dense pattern that juxtaposes dreams of expansion with their terrible (and terribly repeated) price: A Chinese cloud design blends into smoke from power plants and explosions.

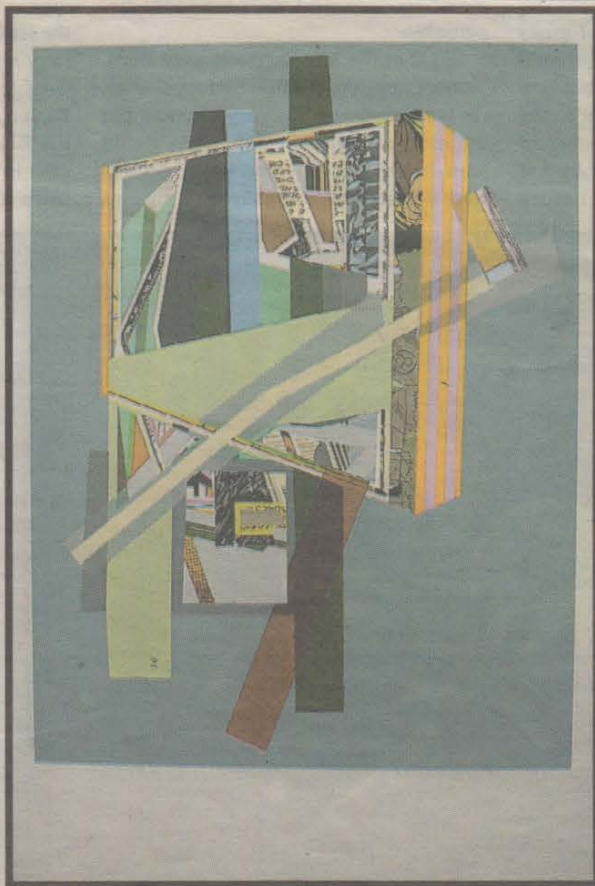
Departing from geopolitics and large-scale works in the large main room, the next artists take a more interior approach. Lee Bul makes glittering, hanging sculptures of mirror, wood, and metal—fantastically intricate, prism-like sci-fi cities-as-spaceships. And Mary Lum's paintings have a similarly gem-like presence. Inspired by walks through Paris, they are like comic strips in origami, incorporating textures, letters and comics to create a sense of folding movement through the grids of elevators, corridors and scaffolding.

In the final room, it would have been nice to find some political urgency or human intervention. Instead we get disconnected sensory experiences: Kim Faler carves studs out of fragrant soap in a site-specific installation revealing building structure, and we hear a recording of sounds from bus conductors and others in Lagos, Nigeria, by Emeka Ogboh. This room didn't hold together well, and Carlos Garaicoa's lighted rice-paper city

model didn't add much to the conversation (it was like a poorer cousin to Pich's *Compound*).

I was also unimpressed by Liz Glynn's filmed performance, *The 24 Hour Roman Reconstruction Project* (2008), showing volunteers building a model of Rome in one day (get it?). Fun, probably, but you had to be there. Her *Deconstruction Ritual* (*Last Rites*) is a film of people at night dismantling a pyramid the artist built out of shipping pallets in the hills of Los Angeles. It's as esoteric as it sounds. A series of artifacts from these performances, mounted in faux archeological museum style, were, because of their humor, the most successful of Glynn's pieces here.

Invisible Cities is a show with some strengths as well as some real weaknesses. The strengths were in the works that included the human form, or suggestions of its erasure, because if cities are to survive, it's going to be through the actions of the people who live there. ■



A sense of folding movement: Mary Lum's *Untitled No. 5*.