

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Stone and Steel Sculptures Tap into a Museum's Industrial Roots

NORTH ADAMS, Mass. – Richard Nonas was an anthropologist before turning to art making. The buildings that now house MASS MoCA were a series of factories dating back to the Civil War, when they housed textile mills that churned out cloth for the Union Armies. The ruggedness of the place has changed little over the decades, and the museum still has a deeply etched industrial feel – you might even say a scarring.

Nonas's monumental installation, "Single Artificer" (2016), part of the exhibition *The Man in the Empty Space*, sprawls across the floor of the museum's Building 5, consisting of railroad ties arranged in a bending curve, filling the long gallery with what appears to be a segment of a railroad line. Three large chairs, "Granite Chairs (2016 Series, Chairs for Björn)," sit like markers at intervals beside the suggested railroad's path. The chairs offer little in the way of comfort, but rather infer, by their bulk and gravitas, memorials or rough unworked headstones. Accompanying the chairs are stools cut from the same granite, and they, too, sit languid and cool. Nonas uses a minimalistic approach, a simple gesture or a basic series of cuts, to offer up the complexities of the environment his work inhabits. What's implied is that the history of the museum's buildings is complicated, and this site-specific work insists upon that. An easy rendering of the piece might conclude that Nonas has seized upon the idea of the railroad as intrinsic to the museum's history, the connective tissue that allowed raw materials in and finished products to be

sent out. But instead, the piece feels more about the human experience of the place – its anthropology, as it were. Despite the scale of the work, and the rough-hewn feel of the materials Nonas uses, the grittiness of lived experience and a real human past prevails here, something that is perhaps less about the architecture and the factory's process, and more about the factory workers themselves.



*The Man in the Empty Space*, installation view ©David Dashiell



*The Man in the Empty Space*, installation view with *Granite Chairs*, (2016 Series, *Chairs for Björn*), 2016 ©Richard Nonas

The balcony above the window-lined gallery holds a constellation of Nonas's works dating back to the 1970s, pointing to the connections between studio and factory floor. When viewed from this balcony "Single Artificer" forms a long, graceful arc. The stacked railroad ties curl like the gentle bend of a rollercoaster. The pitted floor beneath is a chaos of scuff marks, indentations, and scratches, an ever-present reminder of the building's robust mechanical history.



*No Water In*, 2014 ©Richard Nonas

The main installation is entitled *No Water In*, and it features work (lining the main gallery walls) from Nonas's *Crude Thinking* series. These pieces consist of mounted wood sculptures that feel like relics shaped by multiple uses designed and imagined by a single hand. In part, their placement reminds the viewer to look up and out the windows, in order to situate the experience within the larger rough landscape outside the museum. Framed as a single work, the simplicity of the collected objects reference both the building's industrial past and the artist's high-minded regard for the smallest amount of intervention in the materials used in his work.



*The Man in the Empty Space*, 2016 ©Richard Nonas

It seems that what Nonas best understands is restraint, both in his choice of materials and the way he works into and around them. Nothing is a singular object here; everything is part of this place and its history. What is evoked through the arrangement of rough material is a quiet understanding of not only an industrialized past, but a very significant human presence.

Hyperallergic - 19 avril 2016

Art

*Stone and Steel Sculptures Tap into a Museum's Industrial Roots* / par Robert Moeller

GALERIE CHRISTOPHE GAILLARD  
[www.galeriegaillard.com](http://www.galeriegaillard.com)