

# ARTES MAGAZINE

I

## A Stunning Exhibition (and Quagmire) at The Mattress Factory, "Factory Installed 2019"



**T**he Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh is internationally acclaimed for showcasing some of the most innovative and divergent selections of installation art in the United States. Its co-founders, the late Barbara Luderowski and Michael Olijnyk, very early recognized the importance of Installation art that celebrates a shift in focus from object-hood and what art visually represents to what site-specific work could communicate about a place while providing unique experiences for viewers. Since 1977, this institution has given over 600 artists the opportunity to experiment, take risks, and explore the creative process while engaging with the community through its residency program.

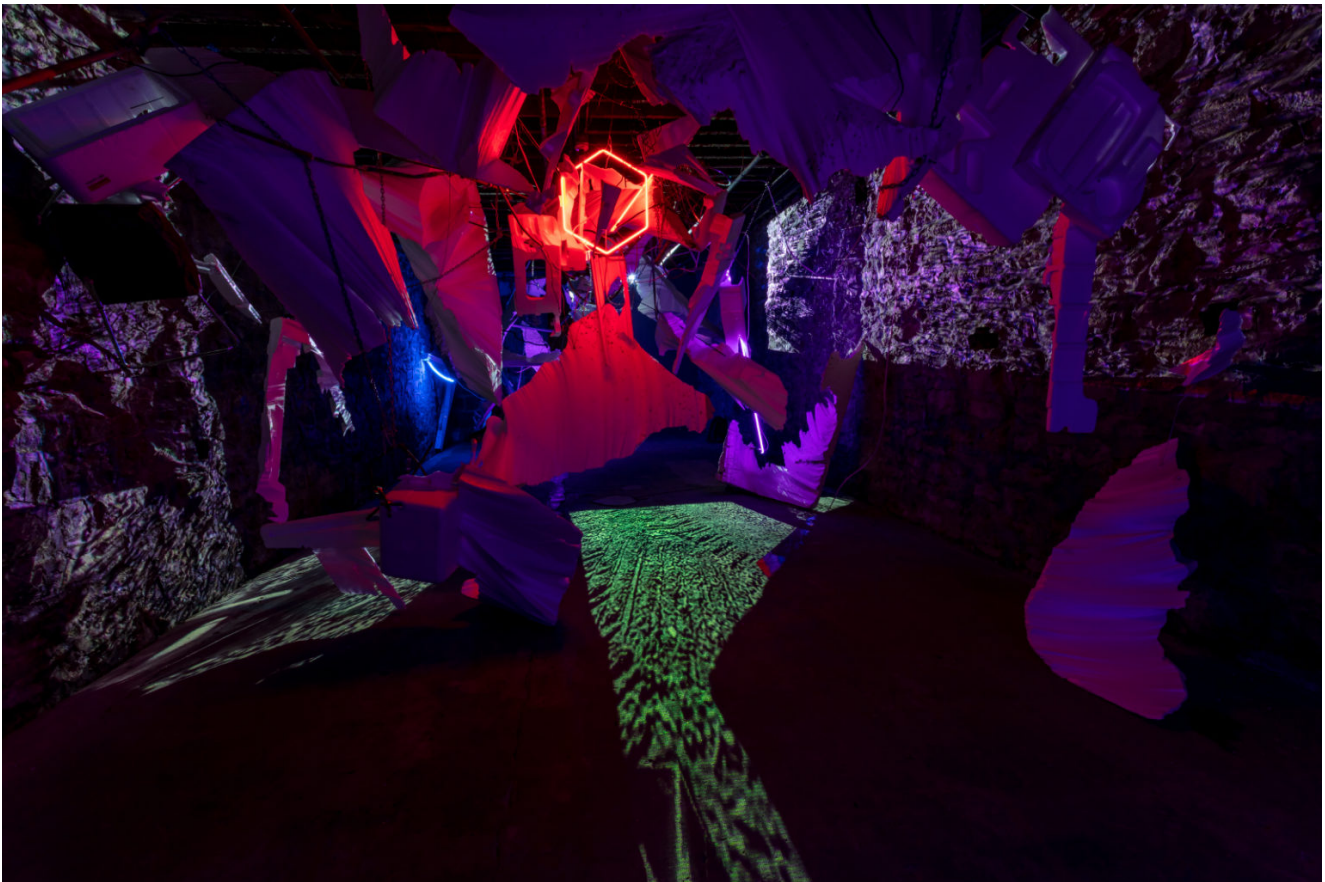
Michael Olijnyk curated the current exhibition "Factory Installed 2019." Although Olijnyk organized this exhibition, comprised of eight diverse site-specific installations, nowhere is his name mentioned or credited. This information is usually publicized and I found it odd that he is neither acknowledged in any gallery wall text nor in the press release as the curator. I had to inquire to learn



who had curated this exhibition. Regrettably, not only is this likely the last exhibition this visionary curator will organize at the MF but also is his very last involvement with the Mattress Factory, since Anna-Lena Kempen, Kaylin Carder, Nicole Hall and Katie Urich brought managerial labor charges against him and the museum, allegedly for mishandling their sexual harassment complaints about a co-worker.



The Mattress Factory  
Pittsburgh, PA



Tra Bouscaren's "Night Blooms", 2019. All photos: Tom Little (Pittsburgh)

The timeline of events are important given that this crisis began festering only days before Barbara's demise and ensued for several months following her passing. The stress Olijnyk was under for weeks prior to her death must have



been unimaginable. I ask, how many people would be in a solid frame of mind both during and after the death of significant person in your life? The Museum's Board of Directors failed to defend Olijnyk, conceivably because of the fear aroused in the heat of the *MeToo Movement*[1]. I encourage my readers to go to the following sites [[Post Gazette1](#), [WESA](#), [Post Gazette 2](#), [Trib Live](#), [Trib Live 2](#)] for in depth coverage about this controversial accusation that led to Olijnyk's removal from the museum.

Having known Michael Olijnyk since the early 1980s, and interacted with him professionally on numerous occasions, including curating the *Likeness/Portraits: After the Legacy of Warhol*[2] exhibition at the MF in October 2010, as well as in other capacities, I concur with these significant artists including Ann Hamilton, Hans-Peter-Kuhn, Kathleen Montgomery and James Turrell who believe he is both innocent and a victim of some larger underlying agenda—perhaps to change the focus of the Mattress Factory. In my opinion this is a case in point of where the *MeToo Movement* was both convenient for some and had gone too far!

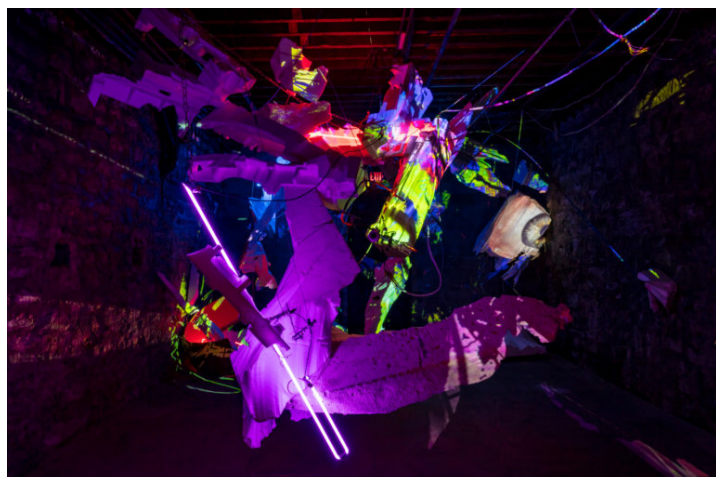


Adam Milner, "Taking good care of your things leads to taking good care of yourself" (detail, see full installation, below) 2019

Regrettably this art institution, renowned for its unique approach to working with artists and progressive experimentation, will suffer in the long run because of the rupture of its visionary leadership with the death of the museum's founder, on 30 May 2018, and then placing Olijnyk first on temporarily paid leave until recently and leaving his future with the Mattress Factory in abeyance. His relationship with the MF is yet to be resolved. Moreover, a large percentage of its original staff has left the institution— consistency and

dedication have contributed to the Mattress Factory's disreputable success!

Currently Hayley Haldeman Lamb, (*Post-Gazette*) the wife of Congressman Conor Lamb (D-PA),<sup>[3]</sup> is the second interim executive director, who is both a former Mattress Factory Board member, and was an attorney at the anti-union law firm Jones Day. I begin to wonder what type of exhibitions will unfold in the coming years with the absence of a curator or visionary leadership. It has been brought to my knowledge that a current board member is part of the curatorial team for the next exhibition. Curating exhibitions is not a normal protocol for a trustee!



Tra Bouscaren's "Night Blooms", 2019.

The current thought-provoking exhibition *Factory Installed 2019* affirms Michael Olijnyk's curatorial acumen! The eight artists showing new work include Tra Bouscaren, Naomi Draper, Nathan Hall, Sohrab Kashani, Patte Loper, Pepe Mar, Adam Milner Patrick Robideau and Jon Rubin. The range of installations is diverse

and range from a political focus, conceptual, to the mysterious and psychological. Most of the artists created work in idiosyncratic ways to alter the museum's gallery spaces. This is most evident in Patrick Robideau's complex construction titled "All is Not Forgotten," 2019 (*below, right*) and *Tra Bouscaren's "Night Blooms", 2019 (above, left)* in which he employs light to visually enhance the uncanny basement stone gallery as well as transforms it into a multilayered, futuristic environment. These two installations are especially outstanding and dramatic, and, both were conceived for viewers to walk through the sites in order to intensely experience the distinctive environments. A powerful sensibility resonates within each of the installations that do not require an

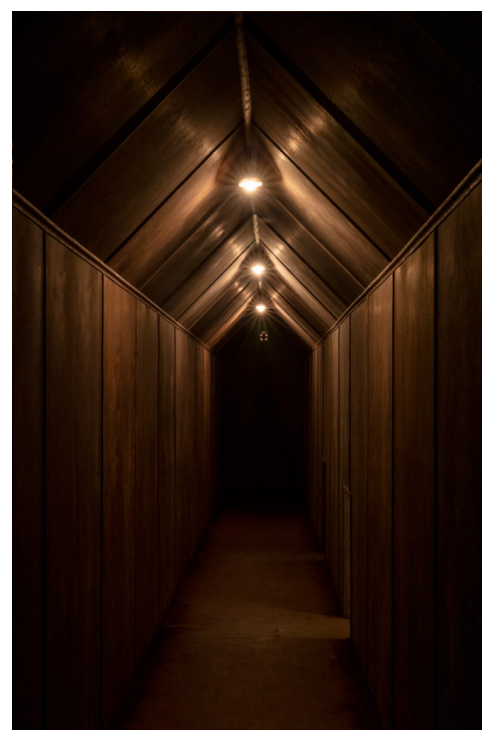


elaborate wall text for viewers to comprehend the work.

Robideau's theatrical architectural installation evokes a film noir sensibility echoing the influence of German "Expressionist" cinema. His use of moody dark illumination and special ambiguity functions as a critical device to transport viewers to an secretive place where they are invited to examine clues that evince a narrative from another age. It is a work about a house, people and how memory fragments information with the passing of time. The visitor must traverse an eerie 40-foot dark narrow, wooden methodically constructed corridor, as if on an expedition. Once at the end a visitor gains access to see a dimly lighted chamber where an exterior facade of an aged house erected at a twenty-five degree angle, a pair of old shoes and a long rope set are visible behind a glass window.

At the far end of the hallway an additional window reveals what bears a resemblance to a small, attic room containing framed photos, a chair and old radiator from an earlier era. The viewer cannot enter the room but can only observe what is contained within the space. Two tunnel openings are in the hallway and they are accessible if one ventures to crawl into gaps, affording them a visual experience that can enhance the understanding of the house. This quiet yet thoughtful construction is a story about a place and its inhabitants long gone. Robideau has said, "the room is not unlike the memories he has of his grandparents' house — his grandmother's boots are there, his uncle's chair."

He acknowledges that memory is fleeting and never exact—we only can partially



Patrick Robideau, "All is Not Forgotten,"  
2019



piece together aspects of the past from fragments recollected.

Tra Bouscaren's immense installation *Night Blooms* exhibited in the basement gallery of the main MF building is an interactive work, employing light and technical surveillance equipment to address cultural waste and the ever-growing accumulation of junk and garbage in our environment. In this stunning sculptural installation he weaves surveillance equipment throughout the piece that projects images of debris while recording the visitors image when approaching the piece. Live surveillance feeds are algorithmically mixed and projected in real-time onto the multidimensional, organic, floating luminous strips that continuously stream video imagery taken from a landfill. Although the topic of discarded objects can be perceived as distasteful to some, Bouscaren's installation bathed with glowing phosphorescent colors of purple, blue, red and yellow is seductive. It resonates an alluring sensibility with its ethereal flow of abstracted serious data.



*Laboratory for Other Worlds*, by Patte Loper (left), is a large site-work housed in the front gallery of the MF's 1414 annex building. She envisions it as an open ended landscape for viewers to interpret for themselves. The piece reminds you of a type three-dimensional Surrealist landscape

akin to Tanguy's paintings filled with personal symbolism that defies exacting interpretation yet evokes a mixture of associations to engage a viewer's mind and fancy. This construction resembles a scene from an otherworldly setting—a type of desolate science fictional lab with its glowing blue light and multifaceted materials. The artist entwines complex imaginary structures, wall drawings and

paintings, small quirky sculptures fabricated from aluminum foil and Styrofoam along with subtle video projections and peculiar acoustic sound. Inspired by the climate crisis, Loper's installation sends out cryptic messages that appear on the fabricated idiosyncratic forms. One is witness here to the artist's intuitive, illusory place.

In contrast to this instinctual work is Adam Milner's very calculated piece *"Taking good care of your things leads to taking good care of yourself"* 2019 (right). Although his two galleries are elegantly executed, visitors are entirely dependent on the wall text provided for them about what is being



shown here. One is a tribute to the co-founders of the MF containing several pieces taken from their collections and the other focuses on homosexuality and AIDS. Intent and execution become disjointed by the "bric a brac" collections and the amber wall similar to a bank's vault stacked with dissimilar sized safety deposit boxes.

Although the exhibition *Factory Installed* 2019 is a stimulating one, showcasing new installation art, it nonetheless marks the end of a visionary, risk-taking era at the Mattress Factory. In recent months, I've said "Where is Hans Haacke when we need him to lay bare the inner workings of this museum so the public can comprehend the genuine story about Olijnyk and the "MeToo" women at this art institution.

**By Elaine A. King, Contributing Writer**

***"Factory Installed 2019"***



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### Footnotes:


[1] *Entertainment News*, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/10/212801/me-too-movement-history-timeline-year-weinstein> **May 25, 2018**: Harvey Weinstein turns himself into New York authorities to face rape charges related to an accusation by Lucia Evans.

[2] <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/art-architecture/2009/10/08/Mattress-factory-s-LIKENESS-reflects-on-artists-visions-of-themselves/stories/200910080457>

[3] Mike Elk, "IMPACT: Conor Lamb's Wife, Hayley Hadelman, Resigns from Jones Day Following Payday Expose," *Payday Report*, January 7, 2019

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 Elaine A. King

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