The Art of the Brick

February 20 – May 8, 2016
Introduction

As part of its continuing commitment to present great examples of artistic creativity in all forms, the Sioux City Art Center is proud to present *The Art of the Brick*, an exhibition of sculptures created exclusively of LEGO bricks by artist Nathan Sawaya. Over the last decade, Sawaya’s unique talents and dedication have taken him to the heights of popular culture as well as galleries and museums across the globe.

While LEGO toys are experiencing a large wave of popularity through an ever-expanding range of kits, an equally strong trend of the moment is “making,” the idea that people are innately driven to produce what they need. From cooking and woodworking to art and mechanics, increasing numbers of people are finding their way back to a whole range of crafts that contemporary production and technology had made unnecessary. Sawaya is part of both trends. He reminds us how exhilarating it can be to return to our childhood experiences with the increased knowledge and awareness we have as adults. LEGO kits can satisfy the young mind’s desire to make anything. But Sawaya prompts us to recall that the sheer joy of making something through our own vision is a much more rewarding experience than following a preset path.

This exhibition is cool and fun. It has been deliberately displayed with bold colors to intensify the experiences of visitors, especially the younger ones. It is, however, an important demonstration of what art can do: transforming the common and predictable into something that shatters expectations. The Sioux City Art Center hopes that this exhibition inspires you to find new ways to be creative.

The Sioux City Art Center is grateful to the many members of Blockbuster Partners III for funding this extraordinary project. A complete list of these generous donors can be found on the back cover of this brochure.

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1. Nathan Sawaya, *Pushing Against*, plastic bricks, 38 x 21 x 21 inches, courtesy brickartist.com

2. Photograph of Nathan Sawaya in the studio, courtesy of brickartist.com
Nathan Sawaya was born in Colville, Washington and raised in Veneta, a small town near Eugene, Oregon. Like many children, Sawaya had loved to create things: he drew cartoons, wrote stories, perfected magic tricks, and, of course, played with LEGO toys. So when it came time for him to go to college, he naturally found his way into... the legal field. Sawaya worked in New York City, but he "quickly came to realize I was more comfortable sitting on the floor creating sculptures than I was sitting in a boardroom negotiating contracts."

At first thought, the decision to leave a serious job in the legal profession to make things with children’s toys seems a little rash. Of course...these are no ordinary toys. LEGO bricks are the most popular construction toys in the world. Since 1949, approximately 440 billion LEGO elements have been manufactured. Estimates are that children around the world spend more than 5 billion hours each year playing with LEGO bricks. Such a well-used product would appear to have little potential for untapped creativity.

In fact, artists for the last 100 years have sometimes used everyday objects as either the subjects or the materials of the artworks. In 1913, French artist Marcel Duchamp famously stuck a bicycle wheel into the seat of a kitchen stool to create Bicycle Wheel. He also submitted a urinal titled Fountain to an exhibition in 1917. In 1936, Swiss artist Méret Oppenheim made Object in Fur, a teacup, saucer, and spoon that she covered in Chinese gazelle pelt that brought together in an unsettling way two types of objects that represented high society.

In the United States, a variety of artists during the last century have made remarkable things from surprising materials. Alexander Calder, most famous as the artist who first made mobiles, became well known during the 1920s for his ingenious Circus, sets of artistically made toys of wood and wire. Calder could manipulate the toys to perform many typical circus stunts like swinging from a trapeze or swallowing a sword. Beginning in the 1930s, Joseph Cornell constructed small, elegant display boxes that contained a variety of objects he found in stores and throughout New York City. These assemblages inspired the next generation of American artists to utilize almost anything at hand to make their artworks.

By the mid-20th century, artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol had led the way in the elimination of the barriers that divided art subjects and materials from the stuff of real life. Rauschenberg included things like bed pillows, tires, cardboard boxes, broken umbrellas, and shaving mirrors in his sculptural works that he called "combine" paintings. Johns has relied on many of the most basic symbols of our lives—the American flag, alphabet, numbers, and maps—as the sources of his paintings. Warhol, of course, led the charge in bringing the
common, mass-produced things popularized by advertising into art settings. In particular, Warhol presented his renderings of Campbell’s Soup, Brillo boxes, and Coca-Cola Bottles as the results of his fascination with the repetitiveness of manufacturing processes and his desire to elevate “things you use every day and never think about” into art subjects. Just as important, Warhol began using screen printing to create many of his best known works, a process that few artists explored at that time because of its commercial uses: the materials in art creation were changing.

While these artists made the materials of mass production and everyday life the subjects of their work, they did not regularly use the actual materials as their own. Over the last several decades, artists have begun transforming used, recycled, or new common materials into artworks that defy our expectations of the purposes and potential uses of those materials. Many of these works are explorations of artistic forms and concepts. Others refer to social or political ideas related to our consumption of products. Perhaps the leading contemporary artist working in this mode is Tara Donovan. She has created large-scale sculptures and environments constructed of things such as plastic straws, tar paper, toothpicks, and Styrofoam cups. Her inventive works astound viewers on a variety levels, among which is the surprise of discovering how easily bland things can become beautiful in the hands of a great artist.

Nathan Sawaya builds off of these traditions with his LEGO brick sculptures from the last decade. However, Sawaya undertakes a number of additional challenges. His material is not just common; it is a set of toys that is used primarily by children. His materials are designed to be made into sculptures, so the surprise factor of Donovan’s works does not come into play: we expect LEGO bricks to be made into blocky little images.

Where Sawaya surprises us is his desire ability to bring a sense of humanity to something that is geometric, plastic, and toylike. He has become internationally known for his large sculptures and his reinterpretation of artistic masterpieces like Grant Wood’s American Gothic into LEGO sculptures. The sculptures that form the exhibition at the Sioux City Art Center are among Sawaya’s most personal, representing the struggles and triumphs of an individual maneuvering through life. In addition, his portrayal of these moments as metaphorical rather than literal elevates and broadens the impact of Sawaya’s sculptures. His ability to portray emotion through deeply expressive figurative works elevates his work from fun curiosities into the realm of fine art.

As an adult, Sawaya had returned to LEGO sculptures initially as a way to relieve the stress of his career. The more he continued to work on them, however, the more he was able to refine his style of creating human figures. In works such as Gray, Yellow, and Pushing Against, figures, approximately life-sized, pull, tear, or push their way against outside or internal pressures. The LEGO bricks create a sense of anonymity, allowing viewers to more easily place empathize with the struggles of the sculptural figures. As noted in the
artist statement below, many of these works come out of Sawaya’s deepest feelings as well as moments of uncertainty or transition.

The exhibition includes seven large photographs by Dean West. This series, titled In Pieces, might at first glance seem out of place among Sawaya’s sculptures. A second glance will connect elements within the photographs to some of the sculptures on display. As a young photographer, West thinks about his compositions as “hundreds of thousands of little pixels.” He realized that his work, like a LEGO sculpture, was a construction of pieces. After discovering Sawaya’s work, he convinced Sawaya to collaborate with him on the In Pieces series.

West and Sawaya traveled together to find settings, buildings, and other elements to photograph and then discussed which portions would work best when constructed out of LEGO bricks. They sought out desolate landscapes in the West, starting in California and following Route 66, with the intent of creating minimal settings for their lonely human subjects. As in Sawaya’s sculptures, the photographs present people who are isolated in their thoughts; but the characters and settings in the photographs give viewers ample room to fill in the narrative of each scene.

The collaboration opened up new possibilities for Sawaya’s creativity. Dog, which is included in the photograph titled Bus, took him back to one of his first large sculptures that he created as a child: a life-sized dog he made after his parents denied his request for a real dog. The three clouds he made for Hotel challenged Sawaya to work exclusively with rounded forms that could be suspended.

And then there is Red Dress. All of Sawaya’s unique skills were required to overcome the complications of the composition, weight, and suspension of Red Dress: from the construction of the bottom of the dress so that it appears to have been blown up by a gust of wind to the coordination with West to place an image of the dress seamlessly within the other portions of the corresponding photograph, Dress. The beautiful and dramatic sense of movement that Sawaya gives to Red Dress accentuates the deep sense of loneliness and sadness one feels when looking at the photograph.

With this selection of sculptures by Nathan Sawaya and his collaborative works with Dean West, the Sioux City Art Center and its Blockbuster Partners hope to inspire visitors to find their own methods for discovering the creative and beautiful potential within the stuff of their daily lives.

3. Nathan Sawaya, Large Cloud, plastic bricks, 20 x 22 x 47 inches, courtesy of brickartist.com
4. Nathan Sawaya, Bucket, plastic bricks, 18 x 15 x 15 inches, courtesy of brickartist.com
5. Photograph of Dean West taking a landscape photograph, courtesy of InPiecesCollection.com
6. Dean West and Nathan Sawaya, Hotel, Type C print on Kodak Endura, 43 x 44 inches, courtesy of InPiecesCollection.com
Artist Statement by Nathan Sawaya

Creating art is my passion. Many of my works center on the phenomena of how everyday life, people and raw emotion are intertwined. Often my art is a reenactment of my personal feelings. I am inspired by my own experiences, emotions and the journeys I am taking.

The primary medium for my work is LEGO® plastic bricks. I use this as a medium because I enjoy seeing people’s reactions to artwork created from something with which they are familiar. Everyone can relate to it since it is a toy that many people have at home. I want to elevate this simple plaything to a place it has never been before. I also appreciate the cleanliness of the medium. The right angles. The distinct lines. As so often in life, it is a matter of perspective. Up close, the shape of the brick is distinctive. But from a distance, those right angles and distinct lines change to curves. It takes weeks to complete a life size human form. The long hours of creating a new piece bring me immense satisfaction. When I am working on a project I enjoy, I completely submerge myself into the project, going into a trance-like state.

On and off, I intentionally intermix subject matter that is steeped in heavy sentiment with the lighthearted and whimsical. The purpose of this is two-fold. I realize families and children are drawn to my art because of the unique medium in which it was created and I welcome that. But it is also a necessary break for me to create whimsy in addition to the construction of the complex human forms. I want to provide a break for the viewer’s eye, as well as a respite for my brain.

Currently, my favorite subject is the human form. I use the male human form to represent the everyman, society, you and me. A lot of my work suggests a figure in transition. It represents the metamorphoses I am experiencing in my own life. My pieces grow out of my fears and accomplishments, as a lawyer and as an artist, as a boy and as a man. The names I give my pieces are generally unsophisticated in nature by design. I purposefully use simple titles to avoid influencing the viewer’s own interpretation of the work. This stems from both my desire for the audience to have a role in the interpretation and my insecurity of defining that role for them. The fundamental purpose to my art is to captivate people for as long as I can keep their attention. I strive to create artwork that is interesting and that is unlike anything they have seen before.
7. Nathan Sawaya, *Gray*, plastic bricks, 45 x 45 x 15 inches, courtesy of brickartist.com

8. Nathan Sawaya, *Strength of Spirit*, plastic bricks, 38 x 21 x 21 inches, courtesy of brickartist.com

9. Dean West and Nathan Sawaya, *Bus*, Type C Print on Kodak Endura, 43 x 57 inches, courtesy of InPiecesCollection.com

10. Nathan Sawaya, *Dog*, plastic bricks, 22 x 15 x 43 inches, courtesy brickartist.com

11. Nathan Sawaya, *Untitled*, plastic bricks, 23 x 13 x 13 inches, courtesy brickartist.com

front cover: Nathan Sawaya, *Yellow*, plastic bricks, 28 x 35 x 19 inches, courtesy of brickartist.com

back cover: Nathan Sawaya, *Nathan Replica*, plastic bricks, 73 x 23 x 17 inches, courtesy of brickartist.com
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