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## **Swoon's first-ever career retrospective, *The Canyon: 1999-2017*, on view at the Zaha Hadid-designed Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, through February 25**

*In addition to a new complex sculptural work called Medea and a sprawling, installation-based cross-media survey filling the museum's 6,000-square-foot fourth floor, two galleries on the fifth floor explore narratives of Swoon's humanitarian projects and legendary collaborations*

**New York, NY and Cincinnati, OH — January 29, 2018** — Brooklyn-based mixed-media artist Swoon (*née* Caledonia Curry) has taken over 8,000 square feet of Zaha Hadid-designed exhibition space for her most comprehensive exhibition to date.

Presenting an archaeology of the past eighteen years of her career, *The Canyon* begins with Curry's ink renderings of New York cityscapes as an art student, which soon evolve into emotive, stylized portraits of the city's inhabitants rather than the cityscape itself. It continues with her whimsical portraiture's gradual guerilla takeover of the New York City streets and her subsequent discovery by and continued mentorship from Jeffrey Deitch. *The Canyon* recalls and thoughtfully highlights career milestones such as Curry's collaborative journey across the Adriatic Sea on artist-made junk rafts to crash the Venice Biennale; her solo exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum and others; and the international humanitarian ventures she's initiated within and beyond her thriving community revitalization nonprofit, the Heliotrope Foundation.

As for the space itself, *The Canyon* occupies the museum's fourth and fifth floors, which are part of a design feature referred to by Zaha Hadid as a "jigsaw puzzle" of diversely oriented exhibition spaces interconnected by skywalk staircases. Curry has incorporated each of these spaces and staircases into the continuous flow of the installation-based exhibition, the entirety of which is centered about the natural light of a dramatic, multistory atrium that is nearly 15 meters at its tallest skylight. Said curator Steven Matijcio of the exhibition's deliberate interaction with the architecture:

"When Zaha Hadid designed the museum—her first U.S. project, 'a museum for the 21<sup>st</sup> century'—she ingeniously gave us the ability to turn up or down the volume of her voice for any particular exhibition. At the end of the day, though, she wanted to create physical interventions that required artists to creatively respond. The space was ripe for Swoon's takeover; things aren't static here, nor should be the display of the evolution of such a complex artist's career."

As exemplified in the exhibition, Curry's core practice is drawing and printmaking with an additional trajectory in architectural installation. Her subject matter is portraiture of friends and family as well as muses of all ages, genders, and backgrounds that she encounters both in her international travels and through her enduring membership in communities such as Cormiers, Haiti (which she first reached out to following the 2010 earthquake) and Philadelphia (where her focus is connecting with people affected by trauma and addiction, particularly the opioid crisis). Often, these portraits are combined with mythological elements relating to the portrait subject's narrative. Many of these stylized portraits go on to interact with one another as recurrent subjects in Curry's compound-narrative installation work.

**NOTE:** Due to the scale of the show, the remainder of the press release is organized into four sections. Each section comprehensively addresses one component of the show: Medea, the survey, the collaboration room, and the narrative room. The sequence of the release roughly mirrors the flow of the exhibition, but each section can also be referenced as a standalone description of that element.



Medea



The survey's "time capsule" room



Atrium view feat. Thalassa



Rafts in the collaboration room

## MEDEA

Amid the aesthetic whimsy of Curry's work are varying degrees of confrontation with the pervasive influence that mental illness and drug addiction had on Curry's upbringing; each of her parents, now dead, had struggled with substance addiction since adolescence. Curry learned just before her mother died in 2013 that her mother had experienced prolonged emotional and sexual abuse as a child. This allowed Curry to begin reconcile her own traumatizing childhood by realizing it wasn't her fault and that her parents weren't bad people; rather, that addiction itself stems from trauma and should be treated with radical empathy rather than disdain.

A complex, site-specific new sculptural work called *Medea*, which explores Curry's maternal family tree through the framework of an immersive and interactive artwork, is perhaps the conceptual centerpiece of the exhibition. Named for the Greek myth in which Medea kills her family members, the piece is made up of two structural components: a main "house" and a freestanding switchboard station. The "house" combines media ranging from Curry's signature wheatpaste portraiture and whimsical architectural elements to approximately 30 audio recordings that people can listen to via 1980s-era telephone receivers as well as 18 found objects (e.g. a coffee mug, a candlestick) that are wired "tin can phone"-style. The piece further touches on Curry's regard for the power of interactive storytelling through its incorporation of a functionally refurbished vintage telephone switchboard that invites visitors to manually move the wire clamps to experience poignant audio content including poetry and lyrics, Jungian psychotherapy, and painful excerpts from tales of growing up surrounded by addiction. These audio pieces exist to provide context for Curry's story and the tragic legacy of Medea, filicide, and strife within families.

"The stories are dark and ugly and a little terrifying," said Curry. "They're transmissions straight from the inner workings of a psyche engaged in the battle of finding truth while sorting through the pain and confusion of intergenerational trauma. The first thing I understood while making this piece is that intergenerational trauma survives by imposing silence and shame."

*Medea* is autobiographical, so the audio also serves to unpack its physical layers. The work is crowned by one of Curry's most recognizable figures, *Ice Queen*, which is a symbolically stylized (and aptly titled) portrait of her maternal grandmother. An interpretation of the actual *Medea* myth is recreated with portraits of Curry's great grandmother, grandmother, mother and sister, as well as a fetus that dangles between two dancing skeletons.

## THE SURVEY

Prior to *Medea*, the exhibition flow begins elsewhere on the fourth floor, where visitors enter a 2,000 square foot gallery space adjacent to the main atrium. Curry conceived this first section of the exhibition as a "time capsule" where guests explore her career chronology in the form of a singular, continuous installation along the perimeter of the room. (The time capsule was actually created in four numbered sub-capsules, each tackling a quarter of her career, which were interlaced *in situ*).

We start with Curry's earliest linoleum block prints, which she made while a student at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. They depict New York City street scenes rather than the portraiture she is now known for. We then see the turning point where she began to print these scenes onto vellum in order to wheatpaste directly onto public walls; this technique would evolve into her signature "street art." In this first section of the time capsule, we also see Curry's first full-length figure, a portrait of her grandfather

combined with a cross-section of one of her urban street scenes. An aside: when buying blocks of linoleum became infeasible on Curry's art student budget, she started experimenting with the medium of cut paper, which would ultimately combine with block printing to define the core of her studio practice. A series of cut-paper cicadas adorns this section, with their 17-year gestation period mirroring the span of the survey exhibition.

Further in the time capsule room, we see portraits establish themselves as the focus of Curry's practice. She begins using expressive stills of the inhabitants of a place as a larger social observation, rather than full scenes of the place itself. She credits American photographer Helen Levitt as one of her primary influences at this time. Also in this section, we see the inventory of Curry's portraits (in paper, vellum, and Mylar) take on added dimensionality as she begins to construct rudimentary tableaux in her apartment kitchen. With some elements mounted to found materials and others hanging from above, these assemblages foreshadowed future installation work, as well as much more expansive projects involving the actual building and restoration of rafts and houses.

In the third section of the time capsule room, we are taken to 2005, where Curry continued to push further into "psycho-geographical" portraits. She created a series of prints based on views into New York City subway windows that would comprise the front entrance of her first major site-specific installation: her debut solo show at Deitch Projects on Grand Street. The front door of the installation led to a hallway through which viewers could catch glimpses of the windows as they walked, an effect that was reminiscent of seeing into a neighboring cabin as two subway cars pass one another inside the tunnels. With this project, Curry began to "compose" space according to the principles of her drawings. Conceiving the gallery as a continuous installation, she sought to move people through a room in a similar way as she would lead one's eye through a composition.

In the fourth and final section of the time capsule, moving towards 2010 and beyond, the scope of Curry's practice expanded exponentially as she participated in ambitious international ventures which combined art with human rights and civic revitalization. The breadth of her figurative work underwent a similar expansion as Curry's portraits grew more intimate and archetypal at once. What began as a private catalog of anonymous city-goers came to include representations of her friends, family, colleagues and collaborators as figures that live as both subjects and symbols. For instance, Curry's friend and muse Naima was the model for the ascendant water goddess Thalassa (a highly recurrent figure in Curry's work of the past seven years), speaking to the way Curry weaves mythology, folklore and fairy tales into observational portraiture to build rich, composite characters.

Upon exiting the time capsule room, visitors encounter sculptural composites of Curry's most well-loved figures. They are centered about a freestanding rendering of *Thalassa*, which debuted at the New Orleans Museum of Art in response to Hurricane Katrina (the specific *Thalassa* sculpture that debuted at NOMA—a ceiling-suspended version—is now in the permanent collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts). *Thalassa* subsequently graced the Bowery Mural Wall in 2013 following Hurricane Sandy and also framed the centerpiece of Curry's 2014 solo exhibition, *Submerged Motherlands*, at the Brooklyn Museum.

The exhibition flow then proceeds toward an immersive "tunnel" composed of stark white cutouts and whimsical Mylar lace against scarlet-red background. The tunnel is a literal and metaphorical passageway between the time capsule and Curry's new work, allowing us to experience a dreamlike slice of Curry's subconscious as we pass through to *Medea*. Curry embraces the low ceilings and intimate quarters Zaha Hadid has provided and channels the space an outlet from the soaring atrium; a grotto of aquatic sea creature cutouts and sirens from the mid-2000s interconnected by tumbling Mylar lace dripping from the ceiling onto the walls. Following the climactic rise of *Thalassa* in the preceding atrium, explains curator Stephen Matijcio, the tunnel is a "subterranean allegory of the artist's psyche and a reconciliation of emotional trauma."

The tunnel lets out into *Medea* before visitors continue to the fifth floor via a chute-like skywalk staircase adorned in Mylar cutouts and custom wallpaper of Curry's design. Each of five wallpaper prints throughout the exhibition is its own titled artwork, inspired by her career and correlating with the

content of the survey. The wallpaper, which adorns over a quarter of the gallery on the fourth floor, is a response to the architecture of Zaha Hadid and Curry's desire to activate its many planes. Initially describing the building's atrium as "soaring, diminutive and disorienting," she sought a treatment that would dance across walls and amplify the patterns pasted on Hadid's imposing black staircases. In the prints, Curry marries past designs with fairy tales and folklore in monumental swaths of hand-crafted wallpaper, which was silkscreened in Brooklyn on tables the length of a football field.

## **THE NARRATIVE ROOM**

Upstairs, a "narrative room" peers into the lives of several of Curry's recurrent portrait subjects and muses from all walks of life. To Curry, these portraits amplify and transcend the individual in order to serve as a portal to the deeper social issues each subject faces.

- In 2008, Curry immortalized Mexican teenager Sylvia Elena Morales Huerta, turning the young woman's murder into a poignant memorial against femicides in Juarez and the border politics that contribute to this epidemic.
- In 2012, Curry traveled to Meru, Kenya to work in the fight against violence against women. She worked with an organization called "The Equality Effect," which brought legal action against the country's government to enforce constitutional protection against rape. In conjunction with The Equality Effect, Curry worked with women at the Tumaini Safe House to create art that could be sold to raise money for legal fees. While there, she created a portrait of two girls making art.
- In 2015, Curry collaborated with mental health professionals to confront the punitive culture that often surrounds substance abuse in the United States by working with Mural Arts Philadelphia to tell stories via art therapy workshops and community projects. Portrait subjects include Sonya, who suffered from "emotionally-induced epilepsy;" Yaya, who was sentenced to life in prison at age seventeen; and George, who shared Curry's experience of having an addicted mother.
- In 2017, at a time when asylum and immigration was commonly spoken about in xenophobic terms of crisis and alienation, Sweden offered a striking counterpoint: counting a full 6% of the country's total population as refugees from Syria and Afghanistan. When Curry had an exhibition at the Skissernas Museum in Lund, Sweden last year, she created a two-story portrait of Syrian immigrant Maram Alawad. A smaller version is on view in the narrative room.

Spanning almost ten years and a diverse quartet of countries, these projects highlight Curry's practice of employing art as a catalyst to connect individuals and communities, and to bring attention to important political causes.

## **THE COLLABORATION ROOM**

Curry has participated in a number of large-scale collaborative projects over the past two decades that continue to live outside her direct involvement. The "collaboration room" of *The Canyon* highlights four undertakings, spanning eleven years and three countries, which employ art as a catalyst for unconventional community building and civic revitalization. While varied in appearance, these endeavors are characterized by an aspirational and inclusive approach, employing local people and resources to cultivate career skills; to establish sustainable operations; and to infuse architecture with creativity. In each, Curry is one part of many, working alongside artists, educators, musicians, farmers, architects, and organizations to promote alternative forms of living, working, and thinking.

In 2015, Curry received 501(c)(3) nonprofit designation for the Heliotrope Foundation, which she created as a way to aid urgent social crises and streamline funding for three main community projects she'd already grown involved with: the Konbit Shelter Project (Cormiers, Haiti); Transformazium and Braddock Tiles (Braddock, Pennsylvania); and Dithyrambalina and the Music Box (New Orleans, Louisiana).

- Haiti: The Konbit Shelter project emerged as a building effort in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, but has since grown into a long-term relationship between communities. The locally sourced project employs a region-specific architectural style and construction method to build a sustainable housing system that is impervious to future natural disasters—and beautifully adorned with sculptural elements of Curry’s design.
- Braddock: Located in the eastern suburbs of Pittsburgh, Braddock embodies the post-industrial struggle of a rust belt city undergoing unemployment, mass exodus, and other urgent social crises. Curry and five friends established the Transformazium collective in 2007 with a stated mission to "use the creative process in combination with locally identified resources to transform ideas into social and economic benefit." What’s emerged is a multi-tiered community arts initiative with far-reaching impact on local youth development.
- New Orleans: “The Music Box” started when Curry came in 2010 to help artistically transform an 18<sup>th</sup> century Creole cottage that had survived Hurricane Katrina. The project ultimately spiraled into the creation of a musical village of reclaimed materials with instruments embedded in the house itself. The Music Box became a sonic playground, performance venue, and laboratory for musical architecture and community engagement, having hosted 70 musicians and 15,000 visitors in its first nine months alone and countless more as it continues to expand.

The fourth project highlighted in *The Canyon*’s collaboration room is Curry’s legendary junk raft armadas: *Miss Rockaway Armada* (2006); *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea* (2008); and *Swimming Cities of Serenissima* (2009). The journeys are presented by way of an immersive screening room, its entranceway flanked by huge pieces of the actual rafts. On view is looped documentary footage of a band of over thirty artists traveling hundreds of miles over three separate journeys from 2006 to 2009, stopping along the way to entertain local communities and to welcome hop-ons with open arms.

*Miss Rockaway Armada* came first, in 2006. Curry and a crew of 30 built “110 feet of junk raft out of everything that we could beg, buy, borrow and steal from the fat of the cities,” to, in her account, “take it down the Mississippi River, singing, dancing and telling stupid jokes.” The craft subsequently traveled 800 miles over two summers, making it as far as St. Louis, Missouri in what Curry describes as “a private world and public spectacle at the same time.” In her words, “I wanted to build a floating microcosm of all that I held dear...I wanted to live on a honeycomb of junk rafts, grow food, compost our waste, build our own motors that ran on grease and learn how to live in a different way than the systems we know now.” As such, Curry envisioned these boats as beacons of a more communal way of life: spreading their message by way of work-shops, performances, shared meals, zine libraries and a collection of artifacts gathered along the way.

The second chapter, *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea*, traveled for a month in 2008 down the Hudson between Manhattan and Troy, New York, eventually docking in Long Island City for Curry’s exhibition of the same name at Deitch Projects. The third iteration, *Swimming Cities of Serenissima in* 2009, reactivated three of these rafts to sail across the Adriatic Sea (from Kapar, Slovenia to Venice, Italy) to crash the Venice Biennale. Arriving with the triumphant spirit of magical, mysterious outsiders looking for refuge, Curry’s group overcame improbable odds and police warnings to sail down the city’s Grand Canal. As models that elicited curiosity, wonder and post-urban possibility, she concludes of the project as a whole: “we were changing lives in some modest but stubbornly glimmering way.”

**The Canyon: 1999-2017 is on view at the Contemporary Arts Center’s Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art (44 East 6<sup>th</sup> Street in Downtown Cincinnati) through Sunday, February 25.**

#### **ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, CINCINNATI**

Founded in 1939 as the Modern Art Society, the CAC was one of the first U.S. institutions dedicated to exhibiting the art of our time. In 2003, the Center moved to its freestanding home, the Zaha Hadid-designed Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art. The CAC exhibits new developments in painting, sculpture, photography, architecture, performance art and new media. The CAC is supported by the individuals and businesses that give annually to ArtsWave, the Ohio Arts Council, the City of Cincinnati, and the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as contributions and grants from generous individuals, corporations and foundations.