



Wonder

Nicholas R. Bell

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Wonder celebrates the reopening of the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery following a major renovation of its historic landmark building, the first purpose-built art museum in the United States. Nine major contemporary artists, including Maya Lin, Tara Donovan, Leo Villareal, Patrick Dougherty, and Janet Echelman, were invited to take over the Renwick's galleries, transforming the whole of the museum into an immersive cabinet of wonders. Mundane materials such as index cards, marbles, sticks, and thread are conjured into strange new worlds that demonstrate the qualities uniting these artists: a sensitivity to site and the ways we experience place, a passion for making and materiality, and a desire to provoke awe.

A wide-ranging essay by Nicholas R. Bell connects these artworks to wonder's role throughout Western culture, to the question of how museums have evolved as places to encounter wondrous things, and to the symbolic weight of the moment as this building is "dedicated to art" for the third instance in three centuries. "It is of no small consequence," writes Bell, "that we, as a public, commit to the perpetuation of spaces that harbor the potential for subjective and intensive encounters with art." That we maintain museums for this purpose reveals wonder to be fundamental in our quest to establish who we are, and to grasp the universe beyond.

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