

artnet news

Cascone, Sarah: *Katharina Grosse Paints the Rockaways Red for the Summer*

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Katharina Grosse Paints the Rockaways Red for the Summer

Grosse transforms Fort Tilden's decaying aquatics building into a colorful work of art.

Sarah Cascone, July 3, 2016



Katharina Grosse, "Rockaway!" Courtesy of Sarah Cascone.

On Sunday, July 3, a monumental new work by Katharina Grosse was unveiled in the Rockaways. An abandoned Army aquatics facility in Fort Tilden Park has been transformed by the artist into a swirling parfait of red, pink, and white, a stunning large-scale, sunset-inspired sculptural environment that is Grosse's first installation in New York.

The project is part of "Rockaway!," a biennial series of outdoor art installations commissioned by MoMA PS1 that was introduced in response to Hurricane Sandy. Connecting her work with that tragic event, Grosse has turned the building, which was gutted by the hurricane, into a place of surreal beauty. The piece simultaneously stands out thanks to its bright colors and blends into its surroundings, the paint bleeding off the architecture into the surrounding seaside landscape.



Katharina Grosse with her work "Rockaway!" Courtesy of MoMA PS1.

The Rockaways were one of the areas hardest hit by Hurricane Sandy. In the aftermath, Klaus Biesenbach, chief curator at large of the Museum of Modern Art and director of MoMA PS1, who has a home there, pioneered efforts to provide support and assistance to the local community, and has continued to help its rehabilitation through his work with MoMA PS1.

That first year following the storm, he led the construction of a temporary building on Beach 95th Street called the VW Dome 2 that became a hub for relief and volunteer efforts and a cultural and community center.

A year later, in 2014, he took his contribution to another level. Biesenbach curated solo shows with works by Patti Smith, Adrián Villar Rojas, and Janet Cardiff in the buildings of the beachside community, giving them life, getting the locals involved in the show, and attracting thousands of visitors to the area. The neighborhood clamored for more, and it was decided there would be biennial installations going forward. Grosse's piece was a natural follow-up.



Katharina Grosse, "Rockaway!" Courtesy of Sarah Cascone.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Biesenbach, who wasn't used to hurricane-prone climates, "was really traumatized," he admitted during the press preview on July 1. Visiting the Prospect 1 biennial in New Orleans in 2008, three years later, he was struck by Grosse's contribution, in which she painted a storm-ravaged building in the Lower Ninth Ward. Even though the structure was basically destroyed, Grosse's yellow design had given it "such a temporary glow and beauty," he recalled.

Although the parallels are obvious, there are major differences between the two works. "The scale is totally different," Grosse told artnet News, pointing out that the site at Fort Tilden, which was established around the time of the First World War and has been home to temporary military installations as early as the War of 1812, is just a shell of a building, allowing her to work her magic both inside and out.

Creating the painting was a time-consuming process. Before she could begin, Grosse had to carefully cordon off the area with massive tarps to keep from painting the surrounding areas. She started with a coat of white paint, obscuring much of the existing graffiti on the heavily-tagged building, and then painted over that in spurts and streaks of red and magenta. Some areas feature up to eight or nine layers, each carefully overlaid.

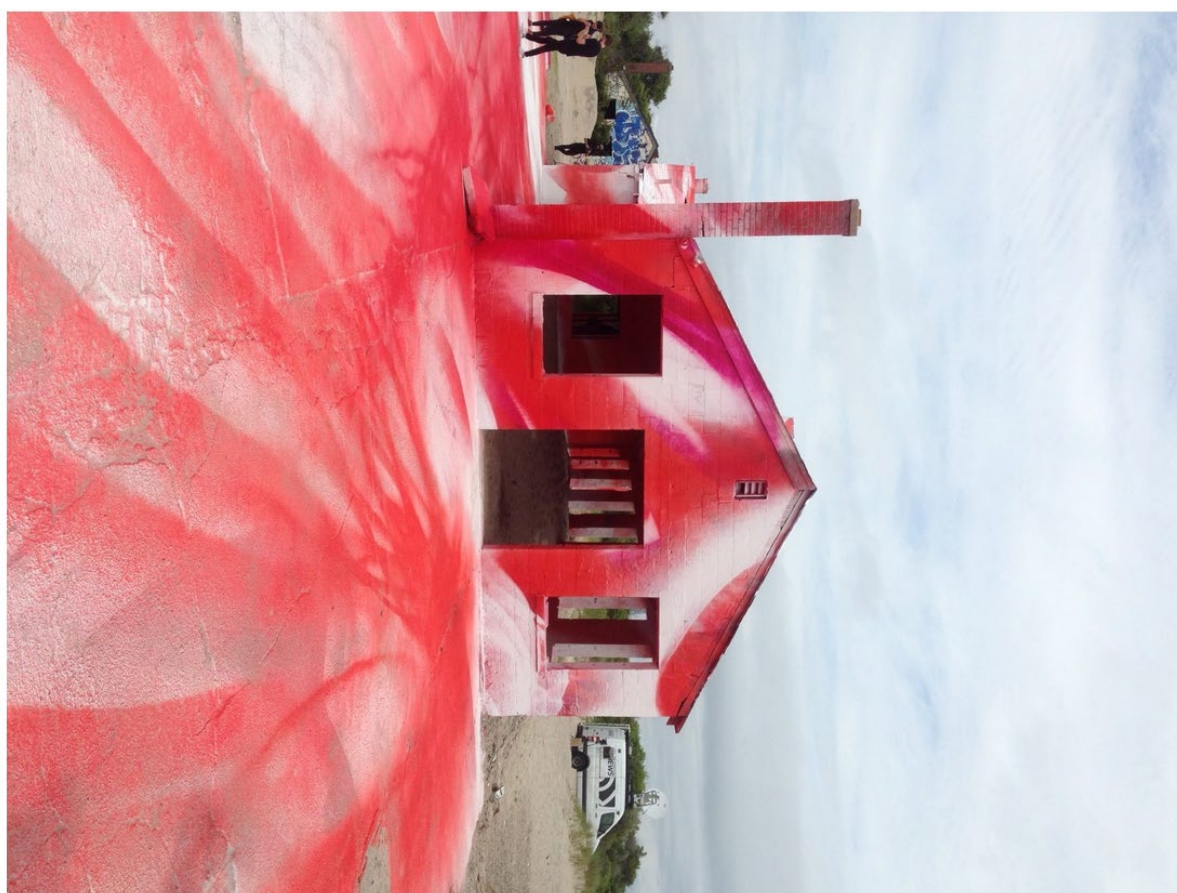


Katharina Grosse, “Rockaway!” Courtesy of Sarah Cascone.

The effect is meant to be that of a wave, washing over the building. As seen from above, the windswept look is hard to miss, the paint seemingly cascading ashore. “The painting comes flowing through the air and lands on the structure,” said Grosse. In order to paint on a full-size building, the artist employed a cherry picker, elevating herself above the roof, keeping the spray nozzle roughly a foot-and-a-half from the surface at all times. Though a brisk breeze was blowing during artnet News’s time at the beach on July 1, there was only one afternoon that it was too windy for Grosse and her team to work.

Although “Rockaway!” bears just one woman’s name, it is a project with many partners. In addition to Grosse’s team of artist assistants, MoMA PS1 worked with a large number of partnering organizations: Rockaway Artists Alliance, the Jamaica Bay-Rockaway Park Conservancy, the Central Park Conservancy, the New York City Department of Parks & and Recreation, and the National Parks Service, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year.

“There’s a long tradition of arts in national parks,” said Joshua Laird, commissioner of the National Parks of New York Harbor, asserting the organization’s commitment to arts and cultural programming. He credits the Hudson River School of artists with helping to fuel the parks movement, with paintings that portrayed nature not as “something to overcome” but rather as “something to preserve and appreciate.”



Katharina Grosse, “Rockaway!” Courtesy of Sarah Cascone.

“Rockaway!” is the next step in the park service’s efforts to restore the natural habitat at Fort Tilden, which saw many of its protective sand dunes swept away in the hurricane. Abandoned since at least 1974, when the Army closed up shop, the building that hosts Grosse’s temporary public art installation is nearing the end of its lifespan. Once the show is over in November, the park service will raze the building, the next step in its Sandy recovery program.

“Rockaway!” therefore, serves as a beautiful farewell celebration. It seems hard to believe that the disaster of Sandy was nearly four years ago. As Grosse’s piece reminds us, the rebuilding in the Rockaways still continues, paired with efforts to prepare for such storms in the future. “It’s a very fragile, very vulnerable barrier,” said Biesenbach of Rockaway. “We know that there’s going to be another storm.”

For now, go out and see this stunning tribute to the resilience of the Rockaways.

“Rockaway!” is on view at Gateway National Recreation Area at Fort Tilden July 3–November 30, 2016.