

CULTURE

In Newport, an Entrancing Performance Piece Responds to the Rising Seas

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Photo: Caroline Goddard for Tom Powel Imaging

Up at Rough Point—one of the stately, old mansions along Bellevue Avenue in Newport, Rhode Island—something wonderful is happening on the waterfront: The artist Melissa McGill, whose *Red Regatta* was the toast of the Venice Biennale in 2019, has mounted an entrancing new public art performance.

In the Waves—on view for free twice a day, at 3:00 and 4:00pm, through this Saturday—engages the landscape, the winds, and a spirited team of community members both to evoke the world's rising sea levels and to emphasize our dynamic, collective power to do something about them. (The

project is presented by [Art&Newport](#) and the [Newport Restoration Foundation's Keeping History Above Water](#) initiative, a response to the immediate threat of climate change to the area.)

In each performance, movement devised by choreographer [Davalois Fearon](#) sets textiles woven from recycled ocean plastic into fluid, undulating motion. ([Parley for the Oceans](#) supplied the material, which appears in 25- to 45-foot-long sheets; McGill painted it in blues, browns, greens, and grays inspired by the site.) “They’re two people caring for a wave,” is how McGill describes the scheme through which the fabrics are animated. “We have a whole community of people caring for their waves, and becoming a trio with the wind and the water. That’s the heart of the project.”



Artist Melissa McGill, creating her “wave paintings” at Rough Point. Photo: Caroline Goddard for Tom Powel Imaging

McGill, who is based in Beacon, New York, has often created large-scale, site-specific art works employing performance, water, light, and sound to call attention to the environment; her sculptural installation [Constellation](#), for instance, formed a cluster of solar-powered LED “stars” around Bannerman’s Castle in the Hudson River between 2015 and 2017.

[Vogue](#) contributing editor [Dodie Kazanjian](#), the founder of Art & Newport and curator of [In the Waves](#), was particularly drawn to McGill after [Red Regatta](#), in which she filled Venice’s waterways and lagoon with traditional *vela al terzo* sailboats hoisted with hand-painted red sails. “It was so effective—I felt like she really conquered that space,” Kazanjian says. Artwork at Rough Point would require a similar boldness—there was the grandeur of the house, the lushness of the lawns, and the vastness of the open sea beyond to contend with—“and I knew Melissa understood that and she could do it,” Kazanjian continues. Besides, she was born in Quonset Point—right across Narragansett Bay—and had gone to the Rhode Island School of Design.

Keen to involve Rhode Island locals in the project, McGill sounded an open call for participants back in July, ultimately attracting a group as diverse in background as they are in age. (“I think our youngest is 14,” McGill says. The oldest? “I didn’t ask, but I want to say he’s in his early 70s.”) To help shape the movement of the waves, Kazanjian and McGill went first to the choreographer and dramaturg [Melanie George](#), who has long been associated with Salve Regina University in Newport. But because her availability was limited (she would soon be due back at [Jacob’s Pillow](#), where she’s an associate

curator), George suggested that Fearon come onboard. “The eclectic mix of artistic references Melissa made in our conversations (Trisha Brown, my jazz work, environmental concerns) made Dava”—short for Davalois—“the absolute right choice,” George wrote to me in an email. “Her Jamaican roots, long history as a dancer with Stephen Petronio’s company, and focus on water in her previous works made her uniquely suited.”



A scene from the first full performance of *In the Waves*. Video: Melissa McGill

“We had a great meeting where she filled me in on the backstory of the work,” Fearon says of first connecting with Melissa. “Ultimately, it was important for me to create a work that centered on the community we are building here in Newport and celebrated everyone’s abilities.” The result feels both practiced and spontaneous; controlled and wonderfully loose. (As for the costuming, each member of the ensemble sports a T-shirt hand-dipped in indigo dye to reflect varying water levels.)

“One of the things that I love that Dava said is, ‘With performances, it’s always a work in progress,’” McGill reflects. The process is never really over. “That is one of the lessons that I think is a really important part of this project, because it’s a vibrant, moving, evolving thing and it’s going to be different every day,” McGill continues. “We’re going to make tweaks and changes; sometimes the wind is will be more powerful, sometimes less. I mean,” she adds, “this is life outside.” In other words: beautiful, endlessly mutable, and very much worth protecting.

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