



# Exhibits Newsline

I hope you enjoy these descriptions of two very different approaches toward exhibition and experience design. —Paul Orselli



[Exhibition](#)

## *House of Eternal Return*

[Institution](#)

## Meow Wolf

[Location](#)

Santa Fe, New Mexico



Meow Wolf’s *House of Eternal Return* (Meow Wolf is the arts collective, and the *House of Eternal Return*, their artwork) is a multi-layered novelty, buzzing like lightning in a bottle, an emergent new model, and a provocative script-flipper of a cultural magnet. I visited on a Thursday in June; my wife and then-six-year-old bought our tickets online three weeks before and arrived on the day at 9 a.m. By the time we left, at 12:30 p.m., the line of families, couples, tourists, and locals stretched half a city block.

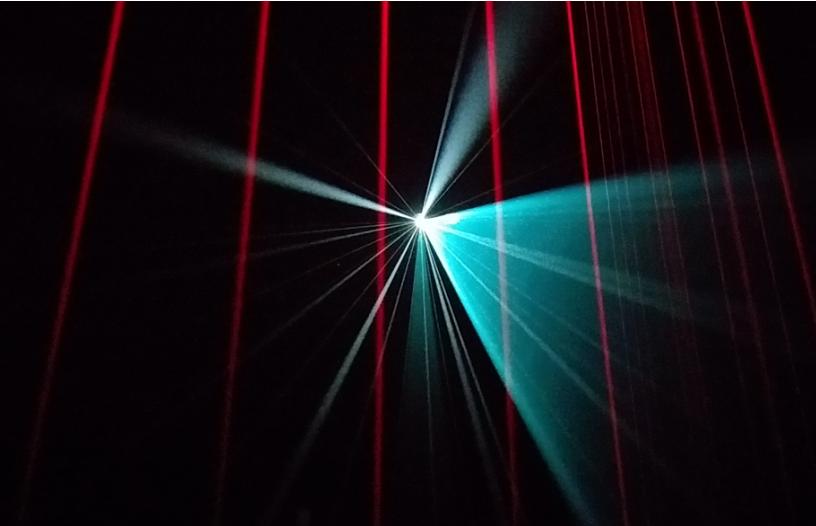
If I have to explain it, you might not be on Instagram – where Meow Wolf is in an exclusive class of hashtags, along with the Museum of Ice Cream and Refinery 29’s *29Rooms*. But the level of engagement here far surpasses these other colorful selfie palaces. You will put your

phone into your pocket, and explore a Victorian house stuck in a rift in space-time, eventually finding yourself crawling through a large home appliance (fig. 1) and into a fantastic psychedelic catacomb (fig. 2), stocked with everything from a room-sized laser harp (fig. 3) to a musical mastodon skeleton, and far more sensory stimulation than which any one person is capable of saturating themselves in one day (fig. 4).

Launched in 2016 by Meow Wolf, the *House of Eternal Return* was built in what was Santa Fe’s last bowling alley, totaling 20,000 square feet. Meow Wolf itself was formed in 2008, a collective of self-described “dumpster-diving, DIY warehouse” artists. But unlike countless other art scenes, this one upscaled tremendously in a very short time (with a lot of support from sci-fi author, George R. R. Martin, we note), and is now a profitable corporation, with plans for national expansion. One of the founders and current CEO, Vince Kadlubek, said in a January 4, 2018 *Denver Post* article, “If this DIY art collective can turn



(from left to right) **fig. 1.** Through the washing machine, to another reality. **fig. 2.** A Day-Glo forest, with hidden wonders. **fig. 3.** A room-sized laser harp. **fig. 4.** A mysterious peephole provides a view of a strange diorama.



into a multibillion-dollar art company and retain its character, then we’re going to be a cultural movement.”

The *House of Eternal Return* is a “go anywhere, touch everything” environment. Interactive systems are profuse, installed in a wide variety of stressful conditions. We might imagine the maintenance-over-time curve is unfavorably steep, but HOER certainly benefits from having come of age in the era of multicolored LED lamps, Raspberry Pi’s and Arduino’s (two different miniature programmable circuit boards, popular in the DIY community), robust WiFi networks, and cheap sensors galore. The building materials themselves are more theater set than exhibit cabinetry: a half-a-forest’s worth of CNC-routed medium-density fiberboard (MDF), and a quarry’s worth of specialty sculpture medium. You know the welders loved working on this; there is a whole lot more monkeying/climbing/sliding than most children’s museums (accessibility here is *absolutely* worthy of a much longer exposition).

Consider that the design and implementation of the installation was completed by a team of 135 artists, each of them sharing workaholic tendencies but otherwise uniquely inspired to create, and yet each adapting both their material processes and their conceptual approach to one consistent and cohesive narrative experience. In this regard, the curatorial management and exhibition production is a marvel.

Like the City Museum of St. Louis, and the annual Burning Man festival in Nevada, institutions like these succeed because they have corporate cultures that emphasize radical mutual trust amongst participants, in addition to taking advantage of epic resourcefulness and a whole lot of great friends. If any one thing forms the foundation of Meow Wolf’s success, this is it.

—Jason Jay Stevens is Principal, Flutter & Wow Museum Projects.



Exhibition

## RESPECT: Hip-Hop Style & Wisdom

Institution

Oakland Museum  
of California

Location

Oakland, California

*RESPECT: Hip-Hop Style & Wisdom* exhibits a culture that has evolved over the past 45 years, not only in its sound, but also through style, artistry, dance, and storytelling. Born in the South Bronx in the late 1970s, today it continues to grow on a global scale in response to socio-political movements and amidst new technology, portraying both the negative and positive aspects of life. The exhibition attempts to reach all audiences, from those who are deeply connected to the scene to those who are experiencing Hip-Hop for the first time. My memories include Rapper’s Delight, Run-DMC, Salt-N-Pepa, and the Beastie Boys. The beats were new, and the words were loud, deep, fun, and gritty.

The first thing you notice before entering the gallery is the large exhibition title – *RESPECT*, in gold letters on a black background – and a red carpet. You immediately hear the Hip-Hop beat, some melodies, and a clashing of people speaking in the “Dojo,” a dark, enclosed space for programmed events (performances, workshops) and audience participation (tagging walls, mixing beats, dancing). A collection of photographs, photocopies, and films depict the beginning of Hip-Hop style and performance. This leads up to the grand room of the gallery space, which is divided into two sections: “Wisdom” and “Style.”

“Wisdom” involves the sense of community, Afrofuturism, and Hip-Hop as a life-strategy, referencing chess and martial arts. It connects the importance of brand for an individual. Objects from the Black Arts Movement are on display in wooden and glass vitrines. While this area is a mixture of different gathering places, overall it feels warm and inviting, much like a family living room (fig. 5). Visitors gain “wisdom” from a large six-panel timeline (1962–present) and are encouraged to create sample lyrics in a community booklet.

fig. 5. Chess boards are set up in the corner of the gallery space.

“Style” is overtly on display with a large graffiti panel and woven tapestry which marks the entry into the wide-open gallery area (fig. 6). The lifestyle represented here is just a glimpse of Hip-Hop philosophies and life expressions. One community example is the “Barber Shop,” which contains a juxtaposition of light and dark, and represents a place where culture, news, and advice are shared across generations. Out in the open is a showcase of personal graffiti style: skateboards, a bicycle, a 1964 Chevy Impala, boom boxes, and dance battles.

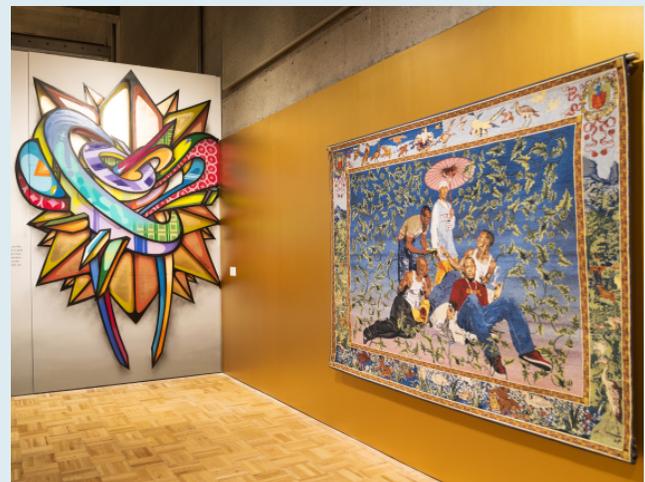
“The Town, the Bay” sits in a yellow and blue alcove, representing the people of Oakland today (fig. 7). While I was there, it was a place of conversation regarding memories of performances and music. “I remember Salt-N-Pepa” and “If it wasn’t for Hip-Hop...” and “Hip-Hop spurred...” This is a space for reflection and celebration of the Oakland community.

*RESPECT* gives everyone access to the culture of Hip-Hop. The exhibition encourages self-expression, creativity, and ownership of style and wisdom.

—Maryann L. Villavert is a graduate student in the Masters in Museum Studies/Master of Business Administration program at John F. Kennedy University, Berkeley, California.

fig. 6. *Style*, the title of one section of the exhibition, is painted on a section panel next to graffiti painted by a local artist and a tapestry by renowned New York-based portraitist Kehinde Wiley.

fig. 7. “The Town, the Bay” alcove celebrates Oakland and Bay Area residents who have influenced Hip-Hop culture.

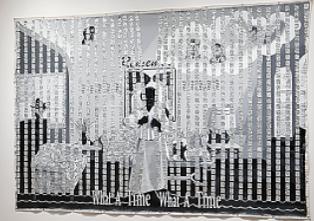


OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA



MARYANN L. VILLAVERT

**fig. 8.** Kerry James Marshall drew visitors into the world of African American history and culture through installations of large-scale paintings.



#### Exhibition

## Figuring History Lessons from the Institute of Empathy

#### Institution

### Seattle Art Museum

#### Location

Seattle, Washington

As Minneapolis Museum of Art head Kaywin Feldman recently stated in *Apollo* magazine, “younger and more diverse audiences insist that museums engage in contemporary issues.” Historical perspective is increasingly relevant in a nation deeply divided on issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Two exhibitions at the Seattle Art Museum addressed these issues by engaging contemporary artists of color in the curatorial and exhibition design process.

*Figuring History*, on view February 13 to May 15, 2018, featured three artists: Robert Colescott (1925–2009), Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955), and Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971). All are African American figurative painters whose work riffs on art history to create counter-narratives to the marginalization and misrepresentation

of black culture. As representative of three generations, chronology determined (not predetermined, since the curators could have chosen to organize the exhibition thematically) the exhibition’s overall flow. The design challenge was to provide a cohesive experience so that the whole became greater than the sum of its parts – and it didn’t disappoint.

The Colescott installation served as an introduction to the exhibition’s socially-aware consciousness in paintings that alternated between art historical canon and pop culture idioms to deliver the artist’s signature “one-two punch” regarding intersectional issues of oppression. Even without catching every art historical and cultural reference, the artist’s code-switching humor was relatable to people of all ages and diverse backgrounds familiar with the work of such comedians as Dave Chappelle or Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, who use stereotypes of African Americans in pointed ways to subvert them.

In works by Kerry James Marshall, the vibrancy and resiliency of African American culture bursts off the walls. This section of the exhibition held true to the artist’s concept – for two series of paintings, *Souvenir* and *Momento* – as full-scale installations honoring

fig. 9. Mickalene Thomas provided a comfortable seating area for visitors based on the sets she creates in which she poses her models.



cultural symbols and icons of the civil rights and Black liberation movements, inspired by sources ranging from monumental European history painting to African American artistic traditions (fig. 8).

Mickalene Thomas offered her take on the issues by welcoming visitors into a seating area that mirrored the sets in which she poses her Black female models. The walls surrounding the installation were hung with the artist's large-scale, glittery canvasses that exude sensuality and reflect ease with her sexuality and racial identity as a gay, Black woman (fig. 9). She brought the exhibition full circle in an alluring portrait *Racquel Come to Me* (2017), a direct reference to one of the Colescott works, *Colored TV* (1977) that was painted 40 years earlier.



fig. 10. Saya Woolfalk and her imaginary friends, the Empathics, invite visitors to overcome "Empathy Deficit Disorder" (EDD) in *Lessons from the Institute of Empathy*.

A separate (ongoing) exhibition, *Lessons from the Institute of Empathy* (fig. 10), is the latest installation in the museum's African art galleries, and I found it equally moving. The immersive, room-sized multimedia and soundscaped Afrofuturist installation by Japanese-South African artist Saya Woolfalk (b. 1979) features her own piece, *ChimaTEK: Virtual Chimeric Space*, a remix of mythology, folklore, and science fiction. The video component is surrounded by selections from the Seattle Art Museum's African collection interspersed with contemporary pieces. Curated by the artist with help from her imaginary friends the "Empathics," and supplemented by expository object labels written by them, the exhibition offers visitors new perspectives on African art along with humorous empathy lessons.

In a world where everyone is increasingly bombarded by Internet algorithms and bots, it is inspiring to have a museum experience that avoids condescension and gimmickry while deepening a sense of human connection.

—Miriam Roberts is an independent museum professional in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Have you seen an interesting new exhibition lately – something that touched you, made you laugh, or moved you to action? Consider writing about it for Exhibits Newsline! Entries should be brief (300 words max), breezy (tell what made it so great), and include three to four high-res images. For more information, email: [NAMENewsline@gmail.com](mailto:NAMENewsline@gmail.com).

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