

Cate McQuaid, 'Fall River's new art museum is "a genuine extension" of its working-class founders,' *The Boston Globe*, January 6 2021

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MUSEUMS

Fall River's new art museum is 'a genuine extension' of its working-class founders

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent



Harry Gould Harvey IV and Brittnei Ann Harvey started the Fall River Museum of Contemporary Art this year. They are artists and natives of the Fall River area. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

FALL RIVER — This is the story of how a high-school dropout and a shy kid from a trailer park turned a pop-up show into a museum.

Harry Gould Harvey IV and Brittnei Ann Harvey aren't the types you expect to see on the international gallery circuit. They grew up poor in communities near Fall River. Harry, now 29, calls himself "a destitute swamp yankee." Brittnei, 28, didn't think she was worthy of attending RISD, and went to two other schools before she dared apply — and was accepted. Both became artists, exhibiting in New York and beyond.

But they stayed in Fall River, an old mill city that never really rebounded after the industrial revolution. A year ago, the couple bought a house here.

Then, last October, as part of the city's second annual FABRIC Arts Festival, they put up a show.

It seemed almost meant to be. Harry had stopped by Portugalia Marketplace to shop. Co-owner Michael Benevides, a founder and facilitator of FABRIC, handed him a flyer. Harry introduced himself, and Benevides realized that a Toronto gallery Harry works with had mentioned him to FABRIC's Portuguese curators, António Pedro Lopes, Jesse James, and Sofia Carolina Botelho.

Fall River isn't much of a tourist destination. The two main attractions are the Lizzie Borden Bed & Breakfast/Museum and Battleship Cove, a maritime museum. Artists have studios in the mill buildings, but art exhibitions are scarce. Benevides helped found FABRIC to connect the city, which has a large Portuguese population, with contemporary culture of the Azores islands.

In March, as the pandemic hit, FABRIC's organizers scrambled. The curators couldn't fly from Portugal. Events went online. And they called Brittini and Harry.

"They asked us to curate a two-day exhibition," said Brittini. "Something people could do."

The artists found a space on the ground floor of one of the city's historic mill buildings. Merrow Manufacturing, the building's owner, helped with in-kind donations. The artists see the site as crucial to their curatorial vision of an intersection of art and labor.

Harry ripped up 3,000 square feet of flooring and installed fresh sheet rock and signage. "Group Exhibition #1" opened at the ad hoc Fall River Museum of Contemporary Art in two galleries — one, a finished white cube, the other, the remnants of a former nightclub complete with bar, stage, and glitter wall. During COVID, it drew people like a magnet.

"Fall River MoCA was the one live art situation. There was a limited capacity, and you could engage with the art," said Benevides. "Seeing people experience contemporary art in Fall River — it was, 'Wow, we've arrived.'"

The interest has ballooned.

"It started as, 'Hey, let's organize a pop-up gallery,'" Benevides said. "It became something more long-term."

The Harveys put gears in motion to have the museum recognized as a nonprofit. Local foundations are underwriting the project. People with clout in the art world, such as feminist icon Faith Wilding and Kate Kraczon, curator at Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery, joined the new board. "Group Exhibition #1" is now open through January, and the pop-up became, officially, a non-collecting, free and open to the public (by appointment) museum. The show features notable artists with local ties, including Wilding, a visiting scholar at Brown, and Allyson Vieira, a New York artist born in Somerset.

"It just tumbled into actuality," said Harry.

The Harveys intend the museum to be as faithful to its scrappy Fall River roots as they are. They have ancestors who worked here. They see their working-class culture as a treasure.

"We want to bring art to recontextualize history," said Brittini. "Not to erase anything."

Across the state just over 20 years ago, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art opened in an old factory in North Adams. It has rejuvenated that city.

Harry dismisses the comparison.

"Mass MoCA is a model that presents the city as abandoned and in need of occupation," he said. "Fall River is neither. It's just in need of patronage."



Brittini Ann Harvey and Harry Gould Harvey IV in the Fall River art museum they founded, with a work by Allyson Vieira draped in the background. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

The Harveys hope to engage institutional partnerships with places such as Brown and RISD. “We need institutions in Providence to extend a helping hand to the bastard stepchildren of Boston — Fall River and New Bedford,” Harry said.

Meanwhile, folks are coming to see the art. “People that live here said, “Thank you for coming back,” said Brittini. “We never left.”

Still, in a way, opening the Fall River Museum of Contemporary Art has been a kind of homecoming for the Harveys. They have never felt they quite fit in with the art world.

“We codeswitched to belong,” Brittini said. “But here, we’ve created a genuine extension of ourselves.”

GROUP EXHIBITION #1

At Fall River Museum of Contemporary Art, 502 Bedford St., Fall River, through January. info@frmoca.org, www.facebook.com/FRMoCA