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Nature's Inspiration

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Nature's Inspiration

Kristen Cochran

Imagine combining music into sculpture. Michael Jerome Bashaw brilliantly intertwines these two elements in his unique masterpiece, Music Grove, featured at the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio. Bashaw's sculpture, created with bamboo and musical instruments, immediately catches your attention as you walk into the front lobby of the museum. The museum not only encapsulates the lives of African-Americans but also showcases African-American art. Michael Jerome Bashaw's sculpture Music Grove brilliantly incorporates sound and music through the masterful use of unique natural elements, diverse textures, and interactive instruments.

Music Grove truly illustrates the beauty of combining music and sculpture. The sculpture's main structural component is bamboo rods, connected with zip-ties, housing a variety of musical instruments. As one enters the museum, the sculpture virtually spans the entire lobby. Viewers weave their way through the expansive sculpture, stopping at each "station" to play the musical instruments and watch art come to life. Michael Bashaw not only uses ordinary musical instruments such as gongs and a xylophone, but he also creates natural instruments out of aluminum cans and metal funnels. One of the main instruments, housed in the center of the sculpture, is a sizable hand-made drum with beads inside. By tilting the drum in any direction, the beads rush to the sides, creating the sound of crashing waves on the seashore. The large metal funnels serve as rain-making devices. At the bottom of the funnel, a large piece of copper foil is stretched across the bottom. When water is poured down the funnel, it races down the basin, onto the copper foil, creating the sound of pouring rain.

Michael Bashaw incorporates several unique elements using natural lighting and organic materials, allowing him to remain faithful to the rustic feel he achieves. The natural sunlight in the front lobby of the museum highlights the sculpture and immediately

captures the viewer's attention, whereas artificial light would remove the natural element from the sculpture. Bashaw uses a variety of raw materials to create the sculpture such as bamboo, water, and wood. The bamboo serves not only as the main structural component, but it also serves as a musical instrument viewers can play by tapping or rubbing thin wooden sticks up and down the bamboo. Another element of the sculpture, water, creates the gentle sound of rain. Wood is yet another significant natural component. One of the main sculpture instruments is a large xylophone, comprised almost solely of wood. In addition, Bashaw also incorporates natural sounds which promote the organic feel of the piece. He achieves sounds such as "thunder" emanating from the drum, rain resonating from the metal funnels, and perhaps, using one's imagination, even woodpeckers pecking on trees by striking the bamboo with wooden sticks. Bashaw skillfully highlights the world's beauty through his use of unique, natural elements.

Bashaw further enhances the piece by using diverse natural and man-made textures. Not only are these textures aesthetically appealing, but each texture also plays an important role in the instruments and specific sounds. The predominant element of the piece, bamboo, contains two different textures. The main section is smooth. The bamboo joints create a ribbed texture. Various sounds emanate as wooden sticks run across the smooth bamboo surface and then abruptly strike the rough edges of the bamboo joints. Gongs are also highlighted in the sculpture. Each gong produces a different sound and tone when struck. Some of the gongs are smooth while others have shallow to deep ridges. The ridges significantly affect the tone produced. In addition, Bashaw incorporates aluminum cans into the sculpture. A portion of the can is smooth while the other portion is ribbed. The predominant sound associated with the aluminum cans is harsh and piercing. The harsh sounds of the cans may be associated with the harsh sounds found in nature such as thunder.

Bashaw brilliantly incorporates music into art using interactive instruments made from natural and man-made materials. The xylophone, a featured instrument, is crafted almost completely out of wood. Not only is its size remarkable, but the various pitches

emanating from it are pleasing to the ear and showcase Bashaw's remarkable musical talent. Large, hand-made mallets allow the viewer to interact and play with the xylophone. On one end of the xylophone, the pitches are high and soft, while the pitches on the other end are low and resonate. Located behind the xylophone, the metal gongs possess texture and size variations. Observers play the gongs by pulling back and releasing tennis balls attached to a thin, elastic line. Sound and tone not only vary as a result of the textural differences but also vary because of the force of the tennis balls. Another showcased instrument is a rain-making device made completely out of metal. When the observer pours water into the basins, the water hits the copper foil and produces the sound of pouring rain.

Michael Bashaw's true talent shines through in Music Grove. Only a skilled artist and musician could create such a stunning and thoughtful piece. Bashaw emphasizes the organic feel of the piece by using predominantly natural elements. His frequent use of varying textures adds not only depth and interest to the piece, but he also creates diverse sounds emanating from the interactive instruments. The sculpture allows the viewer to actively interact with the instruments, truly bringing the sculpture to life. Music Grove is one of many fascinating exhibits in the museum. The National-Afro American Museum beautifully highlights Music Grove by featuring it in the front lobby of the museum. Interactive sculptures are a rarity and many viewers will thoroughly enjoy this piece. One may never again have the opportunity to experience a musical sculpture. Experience for yourself the marvels of sculpture and music.