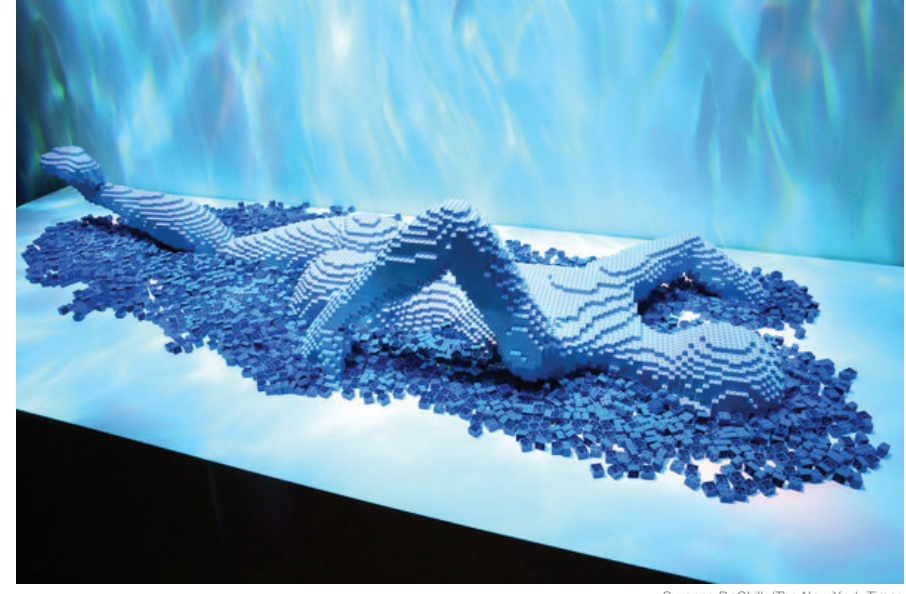


EXHIBITION REVIEW

# A Vision That's Not Quite a Snap

In 'Art of the Brick,' Nathan Sawaya Works With Lego



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

The Art of the Brick "Swimmer," a Nathan Sawaya sculpture in this show at Discovery Times Square. [More Photos »](#)

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN  
Published: June 13, 2013

It is best not to look too closely at Edvard Munch's screamer at the exhibition "The Art of the Brick," which opened this week at Discovery Times Square. Because then you would see that the head is pieced together out of beige and white Lego blocks, their studs protruding. Leonardo's "Mona Lisa," on display nearby, has a smoother surface, composed of 4,573 "bricks" (as they are called by aficionados), but you'd never mistake it for the original — the overall effect is more allusion than illusion.

The portrait's creator, [Nathan Sawaya](#), seems perfectly content with that. He has snapped together a Legoistic survey of art masterpieces, along with galleries of original constructions. In varied forms, this show of his work has appeared in other cities and toured internationally but has never been shown in New York.

Everything is built from Lego blocks using only the colors that [Danish company makes available](#). And mostly, it looks it. Mr. Sawaya proudly notes on the "Mona Lisa" label that "a blurred photo of the brick replica version could easily be mistaken for a blurred photo of the original."

Such a mistake is less likely with Vermeer's "Girl With a Pearl Earring" (1,694 pieces) — the painting's ornament consists of a transparent Lego sphere — and seems impossible with the table-size version of the Great Sphinx of Giza (2,604 pieces). But the resemblance to blurred photos is a useful standard to keep in mind when confronted with an exhibition entirely composed of Lego pieces.

After all, toys are never meant actually to function as real objects do. They are only meant to come close enough to stir the imagination: they let us approach the world from a distance and begin to make sense of it. One of the things we learn from play is the art of approximation, so why not relish here the approximation of art?

In fact, it is difficult to walk through this exhibition and pass a version of Rodin's "The Thinker" (4,332 pieces) or see Mr. Sawaya's own life-size piece "Blue Guy Sitting" (21,054 pieces), and not smile in amazement at the ambition and or admire the skill. We can examine "The Thinker" to see how pieces deftly weave a knot of relations among the face, bent arm and closed fist. And if we blur our vision while looking at "Blue Guy Sitting," we see that rigid, rectangular blocks have molded an embodiment of relaxed contentment.

Some constructions are alluring for other reasons. The dinosaur (80,020 pieces) impresses with its scale, occupying an entire gallery, its snapped-together plastic pieces resembling fractured fragments of fossilized bone.

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Mr. Sawaya also clearly loves his chosen medium. He would have to, considering that he left a career as a corporate lawyer to devote himself to it. A portrait here (4,125 pieces), we are told, is of "my partner Courtney, who has tolerated a man who plays with Lego bricks all day."

The artist also has a large following among AFOLs (Adult Fans of Lego, as that fandom's acronym has it on sites like the Lego users group [Lugnet](#)). One sculpture here has almost become Mr. Sawaya's trademark: "Yellow" (11,014 pieces) shows the torso of a man entirely made of yellow bricks. He is ripping open his chest as a jumble of pieces pour out, the sole contents of his hollow innards. A self-portrait?

Mr. Sawaya's playfulness is contagious. And the limitations are part of the appeal. Basic Lego bricks are so minimalist, almost anything made using them inspires a bit of wonder. In other situations, the way an object is made becomes a secondary consideration. Not here. We look at any Lego construction and can see how it is put together. The act of making is visible in what is made.

Imagine how different the effect would be if Lego colors and shapes could be readily customized. We would simply piece together the colors and shapes we wanted — a "Mona Lisa" smile block or a Vermeer-like pearl. The result would seem less like something constructed than like something manufactured.

And the process would not be displayed in the result. This was one of the problems with the Lego sets that proliferated in the 1990s, in which specialized, ornate pieces were associated with fanciful sci-fi themes, distracting from the original vision.

In its pure form — and Mr. Sawaya is drawn to that pure form — the Lego block is at once the least technological toy around. But in another way, it is also one of the most technological, technological in the original sense of the word, alluding to craft and mastery — techne — the art of making.

We are looking at a form of technology on display. And the effect is playful and strangely contemporary. Mr. Sawaya's use of rectangular blocks ensures that we can't take even the smoothness of a line for granted. So we see how continuous curves are created out of discrete elements. His constructions almost reflect an early digital aesthetic, which is why these Lego constructions can seem as pixelated as a dissolving digital photo.

The company itself has gone still further along this path in the last 15 years, combining its old-fashioned celebration of techne with the most contemporary techniques: its [Mindstorms series](#) are [literally technological](#). They are computerized machines: they can be controlled; their central bricks can be programmed.

But there is no need to go that far. The exhibition reminds us that Lego constructions are amazing not primarily because of what they are but how they came to be what they are. A large plastic sculpture of an American Indian might seem of little interest in itself, but at the [Legoland](#) park in the company's hometown, Billund, Denmark, Chief Sitting Bull is said to be a highlight, 36 feet tall and constructed out of 1.75 million bricks.

In recent years a Japanese builder, Kazuyoshi Naoe, has created intricate [models of World Heritage sites](#) using Legos, including Westminster Abbey. Now, courtesy of Mr. Sawaya, we have varieties of Monet, Rembrandt and the [Statue of Liberty](#) — constructions that offer a playful approximation of reality while celebrating Lego's lure.

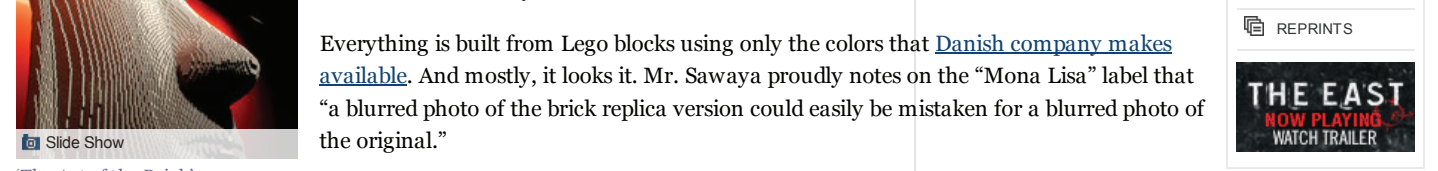
Follow Edward Rothstein on Twitter; [twitter.com/EdRothstein](#).

"The Art of the Brick" runs through Jan. 5 at Discovery Times Square, 226 West 44th Street, Manhattan; [discoverytsx.com](#).

A version of this review appeared in print on June 14, 2013, on page C23 of the New York edition with the headline: A Vision That's Not Quite a Snap.

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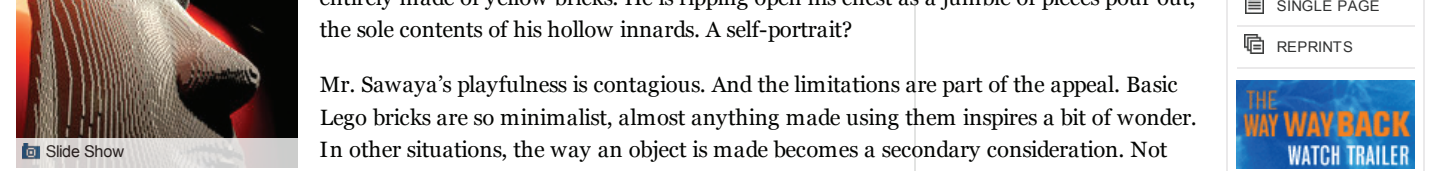
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