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Rockaway! A derelict army bathhouse on a New York beach becomes art
Trashed by Hurricane Sandy and earmarked for demolition, the artist Katharina Grosse gave Fort Tilden a celebratory send-off as a vibrant landmark

Nadja Sayej



Katharina Grosse's Rockaway! piece. The artist didn't realize it would be seen from the air – it's on the flightpath to JFK airport. Photograph: Pablo Enriquez

German artist Katharina Grosse first saw Fort Tilden, the former US army base at Rockaway Point in Queens, in a series of smartphone images sent to her by Klaus Biesenbach, the New York MoMA chief curator and PS1 director who has a part-time home on Rockaway Beach.

“He sent me photos at the beginning of this year and said ‘This could be an interesting site,’” said Grosse on the phone from a hotel in St Louis, where she is working on a mural.

Her first impressions weren't connected to Hurricane Sandy, which destroyed the building in 2012, or even its military history. “I saw it more like a very strong image connected to what our existence comes down to – shelter, the basic structure we need to protect ourselves,” she said. “And it still is.”

Earlier this month, Grosse turned the building into a striking artwork which is part of MoMA PS1's ongoing Rockaway Beach revitalization project, called Rockaway! They're working to revive the area since Hurricane Sandy ripped through with 185 km winds, killing 285 people.

“It has a melancholic set-up,” said Grosse on the location. “The windows and doors were swept away, it's filled with sand. The house is a skeleton, just a structure.”

Grosse's artwork highlights Rockaway Beach's vulnerability to violent weather and rising sea levels and has been created alongside local organizations including the Rockaway Artists Alliance. Meanwhile, the Rockaway Beach restoration project is funnelling \$140m to restore the beach by next summer.

PS1's past efforts at Rockaway include building an art pop-up and a group show featuring James Franco and Patti Smith. Grosse's artwork is dubbed the "final celebration" of the building, which will be demolished in December.

This isn't the first time Grosse has tackled a public art project that ties into what the artist calls the "social fabric" of the area. In 2008, she took a home that was chewed up during Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans' Ninth Ward for the Prospect Biennial. In 2013, she painted a barren area of railway tracks pink as part of the City of Philadelphia mural arts program.

"In New Orleans, people didn't care about the destroyed area, the same of the train corridor in Philly," said Grosse. "I was free, in a sense. I feel that here, as well."

The aftermath of natural disasters can help inspire all kinds of public artworks, especially at abandoned sites. Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei held an exhibition on Alcatraz Island's abandoned prison in San Francisco in 2014, while French artist Charles Pétillon fills abandoned spaces with balloons. The New York artist Yazmany Arboleda found a way to highlight neglected high-rises in Johannesburg by painting over 20 abandoned buildings pink and Russian artist Nikita Nomerz has been putting faces to decaying facades of abandoned buildings since 2010.

Named after New York state governor Samuel J Tilden, Rockaway peninsula's military landmark, was first established in 1917 as an emergency defense base built alongside Fort Totten to protect against attacks.

It has been abandoned for years, drawing urban explorers, wildlife nerds and graffiti artists to the last stop on the A train.

"The building used to be a bathhouse for the soldiers," said Grosse, "for sports or whatever they used it for." Now, the Berlin artist has transformed it into a colorful, site-specific installation painted in a bright, passionate red.

Grosse started by washing the 10,000 sq ft space in white paint. By using a cherry picker (a hydraulic crane with a platform for lifting and lowering workers), she hovered over the building with a spray nozzle, pointing the paint to fall like rain.

Just like a canvas, there is a distinct line where the painting ends. The National Parks Service classified some of the grounds as "historic concrete".

"I couldn't paint it," said Grosse. "It's a national park."

The piece was completed in a week, bringing a blast of color to an otherwise desolate beach. Her piece has been compared to the palette of a sunset, but Grosse doesn't think so. "I used the red and what turned pink and orange because they are the most artificial in that environment," she said.

When asked what surprised her about the project, Grosse said that she didn't realize that airplanes fly regularly over Rockaway on their way to and from John F Kennedy International Airport.

"I was so surprised how you could see it from above, that was something I didn't think about," said the artist, who recently secured gallery representation with Gagosian and has her debut solo at their New York gallery in February.

"I got a photo from a collector in Miami who flew over the piece and sent me a cellphone image," said Grosse. "I had to laugh about it and was a little proud."

Seeing her artwork from above raised more questions for the artist.

"How can a painted image be a part of our life?" she asks. "Not only in a museum, but how can a painting appear on your knee, on your foot, on the pavement? It can be wherever."

To Grosse, it's about experiencing something three-dimensional with your eyes. "We are so fixated on the homogenized screen image but I want to show something that comes directly from the body and is seen from the body," said Grosse.

"I see the Rockaway piece coming very close to that – the longing I have that painting can be a part of our life, in a way."

- Rockaway! runs at Fort Tilden until 30 November