

# Art that you can really get into

BMA's 'BodySpace' installations challenge how we see objects, ideas and each other.

By GLENN McNATT

SUN ART CRITIC

**F**rom the outside it looks like either some not-quite-logical boat or a hypochondriac's safari tent, a fantastical contraption of chambers and tubes suspended from the ceiling and anchored to the floor by a Rube Goldberg-like system of sandbag counterweights.

But from inside Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto's quirky installation, "Sister Naves," the view is totally different. It's a cave with hanging stalactites, a padded cell designed by lunatic keepers, an unlikely womb with a view.

Navigating from one end to the other is like walking on a giant trampoline made out of cotton candy that stretches and squishes under your feet, then immediately springs back to its original shape.

Welcome to "BodySpace," the adventurous, exuberant new exhibition that opens today at the Baltimore Museum of Art and celebrates the human capacity to experience the world through all of our five senses.

Organized by Helen Molesworth, the BMA's new curator of contemporary art, "BodySpace" is a fascinating, slightly wacky exploration of the social meaning of public and private space. The nine contemporary artists represented ask us to consider the question of how spatial relationships shape our perceptions of objects, ideas and each other.

In the last few decades installation art, a hybrid form which combines aspects of painting, sculpture and architecture in one conceptually unified environment,

has evolved into one of the most interesting expressions of contemporary art. Molesworth has assembled a richly varied, conceptually challenging group of works that address basic questions about the nature of art and art-making at the beginning of the new millennium while providing surprising delights for the eye and mind.

### Don't be shy

The timid need not be intimidated by anything on display here, though I suspect many viewers may require gentle coaxing to experience pieces like "Sister Naves" ("naves" is the Portuguese word for vessel) in the way that its creator intended.

Neto's piece is a room-sized mini-environment that at first glance looks like two diaphanous, tent-like enclosures covered by translucent white mosquito netting. They are impossibly flimsy-looking structures that from the outside seem to be con-

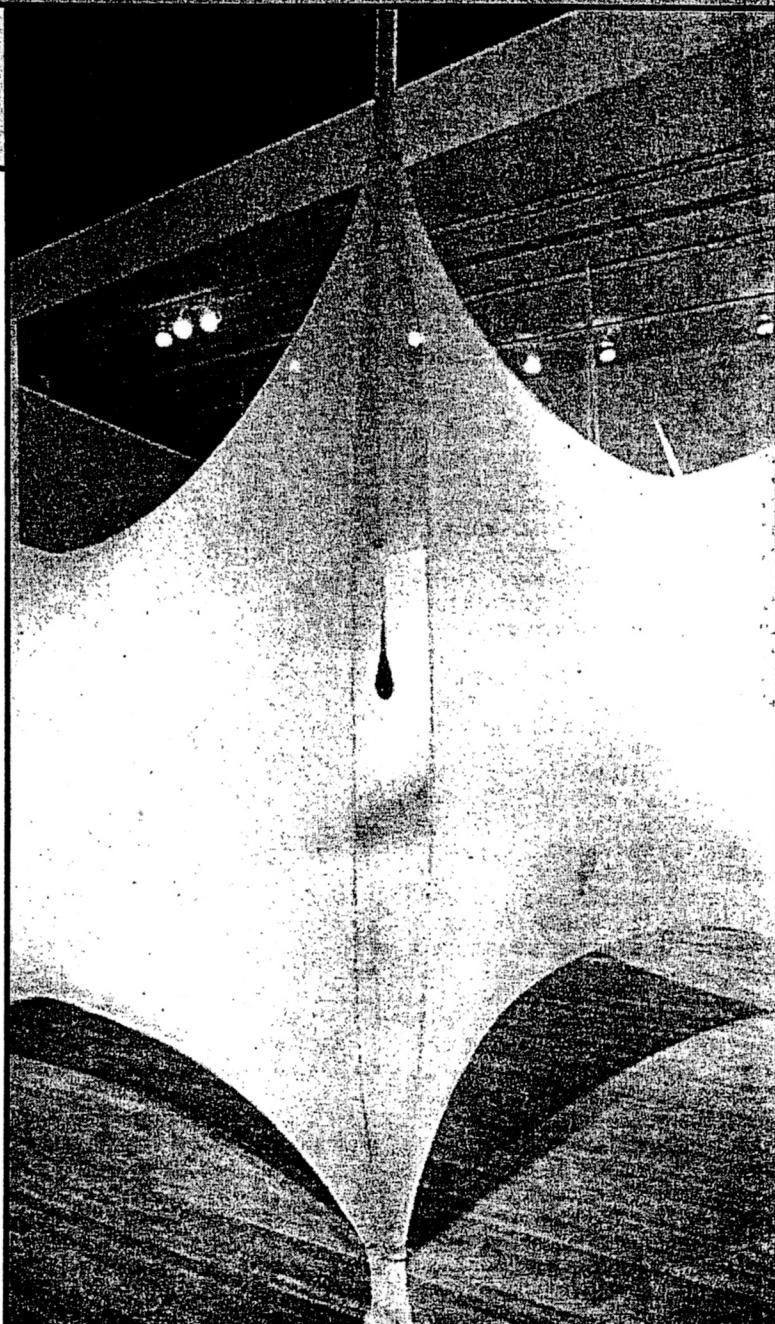
nected to each other only by an oblong tube of fabric that runs between them parallel to one wall of the gallery.

It's only after careful inspection that one notices the narrow gap in the fabric at one of the tent's corners and realizes the structure can be entered from the outside.

At this point, I suspect, some visitors may be tempted, as I was, to mentally file that bit information and pass quietly on to the next gallery.

By all means, resist the temptation.

Instead, take off your shoes and step into the experience the artist has prepared for you. For despite



**Outside, inside:** "Sister Naves" by Ernesto Neto offers two different experiences to the viewer.

its apparent fragility, Neto's structure is surprisingly durable. The resilient polyester fabric of which it is made does not actually support the weight of the visitor, it turns out, but rather merely gives

way under his or her passage before springing back to its original shape.

And it is only from inside Neto's piece that the title "Sister Naves" reveals its [See BodySpace, Page 7F]

# Hesitation houses: tension between protection and exposure

[Body Space, from Page 6]

multiple meanings — as containers, as conduits, as enclosures, as boats. They are kindred spaces, and navigating through their unfamiliar yet unrelenting interiors one can easily imagine being inside another's body, as if one were a drop of blood flowing through a vein or a child enclosed within the womb.

This is a startling, slightly disconcerting experience, one that is sharpened, moreover, by the pungent odor of cloves that suffuses the space and by the consciousness that one is fully visible to people standing outside in the gallery. One has the oddly disorienting sense of occupying an intensely private space that is nevertheless completely accessible to public view.

The tension between public

## On exhibit

**What "BodySpace"**

Where Baltimore Museum

of Art, North Charles

Street and Art Museum

Drive

When May 27

Hours 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

Wednesday through Fri-

day, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Satur-

day and Sunday

Admission \$8 adults; \$4 stu-

dents and seniors

Call 410-396-7100

the ceiling of one of the galleries.

Viewed from across the gallery, Suh's piece reminds one of those oversize canopy tents that people rent for outdoor weddings and other festive occasions. However, from directly underneath the installation one can clearly see the outlines of the doors, window frames and other architectural features of a traditional Korean home.

## Image of home

"Do-Ho Suh presents us with a floating image of home, that most personal and private of spaces, in the public language of geography and cities," writes Molesworth in a thought-provoking brochure that accompanies the exhibition.

"The work creates a public space, yet the feeling of standing underneath the diaphanous suspended house is also one of intimacy and protection," Molesworth notes. "So too the name of the work changes each time it is exhibited, suggesting the transience of home, and the profound ways in which we carry spaces within

our bodies and memories."

A quite different strategy is employed in Felix Gonzalez-Torres' lovely "Untitled (Water)," a shimmering minimalist curtain of blue, white and silver beads that recalls both the vastness of oceanic space and the intimate scale of domestic interior design.

I was, incidentally, somewhat surprised to learn that this piece by Gonzalez-Torres is virtually identical in form to a much smaller version of the same work that for many years was displayed in the museum's New

Wing for Contemporary Art.

According to Molesworth,

the museum terms under which the work allow for it to be shown on a variety of scales, from the width of a small doorway up to quite large installations, as in the case of this show.

The much-enlarged scale on which it is displayed here certainly enhances the effect of this magical work, and one can only hope that after this show ends the museum will find a way to continue exhibiting it in this format.

"BodySpace" also includes no-

table works by Robert Gober,

Sowon Kwon, Claudia Matzko, Josiah McElheny, Candy Noland and David Schafer, all of whom have made distinguished contributions to contemporary art by continuing to explore the minimalist and conceptual approaches to art that first developed in the 1980s and '90s.

The results add up to a very substantial show indeed, one that is at times playful and funny as well as intellectually stimulating and aesthetically pleasing — in short, a fine job all around.

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