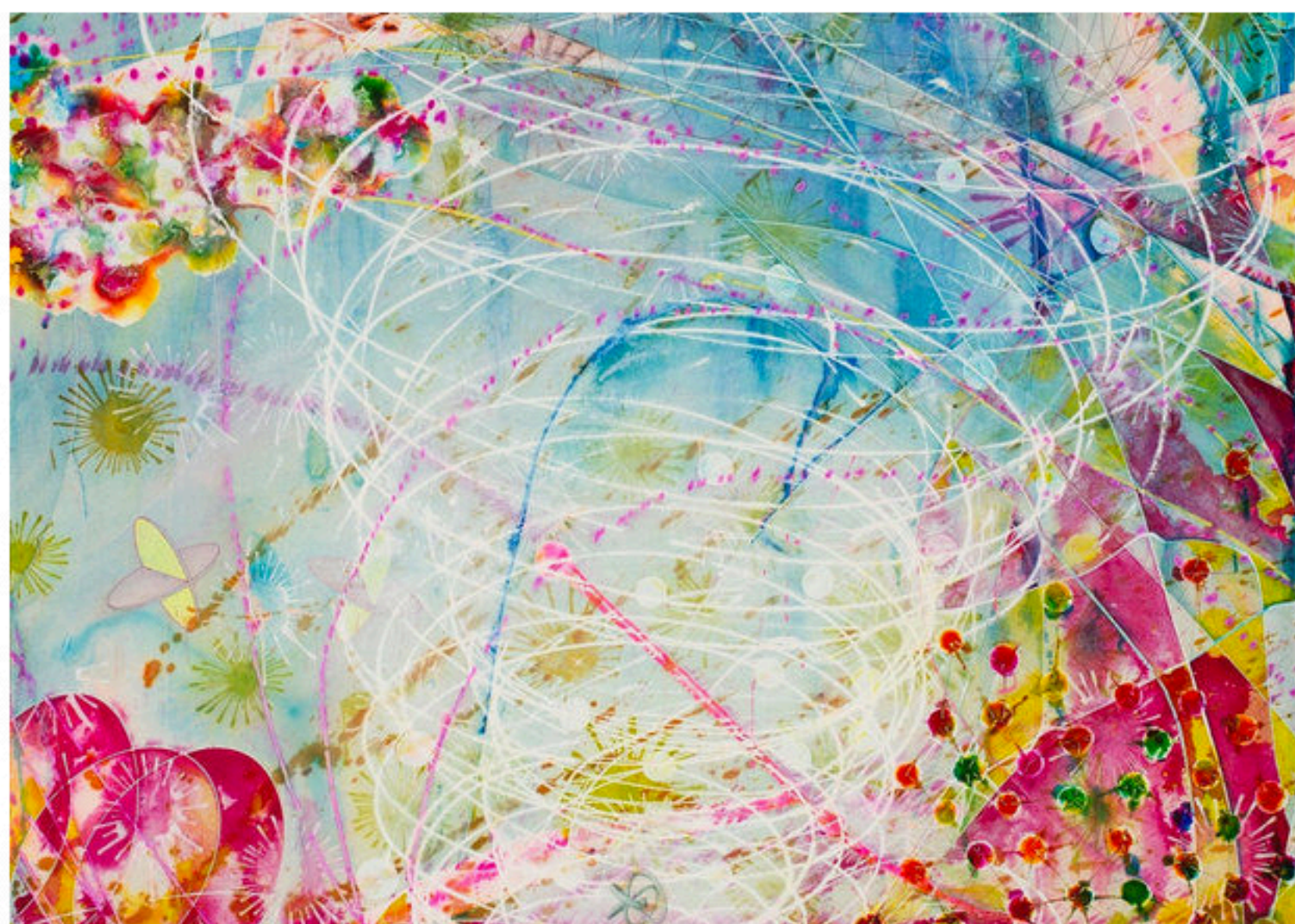


The Museum of Modern Life opens in Portland



"Vortex in a Flower Garden," by local artists Julia Stoops, is featured in the inaugural exhibition at Portland's newest gallery, The Museum of Modern Life. (Julia Stoops)



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Art should feel intimate, but does it have to be so personal?

"We moderns feel 'art' to be a private compulsion, a personal desire to mold or make something out of one's individual experience," writes Ellen Dissanayake in her 1992 book ***Homo Aestheticus***. "But art actually originated and thrived for most of human history as a communal activity."

That philosophy runs through the veins of Portland's newest gallery, **The Museum of Modern Life**, which opens its doors in Southeast Portland **tonight, at a 5 p.m. reception**.

Dedicated to "the cultivation and conservation of modern life," museum director Seth Hill is looking to stage exhibitions and events at an intimate scale. Whether it's painting, photography, digital media or performance, he wants to make sure the art he shows is intimate and accessible to all.

The idea of mass appeal is generally dismissed to the realm of popular culture (or reserved for the fleeting fads of 'pop art'), but our global collective of people – who is growing closer all the time – shares an interconnected human experience that is too often left by the wayside with over-individualized artistic expression. Can't art fascinate and connect us at the same time?

The inaugural exhibition at The Museum of Modern Life succeeds with flying colors in that regard. **"Comets, Vortices, and Colliding Galaxies"** is a series by Samoan-born Portland artist Julia Stoops, who combined geometric shapes with abstract splashes of color, in what looks like either a hallucinogenic fever dream or a fanciful depiction of swirling galaxies.

Either way Stoops pulls us in with elements we recognize – bright arrays of color, the rigid boundaries of shape, and the free-flowing essence of nature. "Vortex in a Flower Garden," the highlight of the set, could easily be seen as a whirlwind blowing through a garden on a bright spring day, but the madcap smattering of geometric shapes reminds us of the rigidity of nature's seemingly random acts – it's an idyllic meeting between Jackson Pollock and the Vitruvian Man.

Art, like the whirlwind, is a force that swirls all around us, a power people harness in many different ways. The Museum of Modern Life is just another in a long line of collections of these interpretations, but Hill seems to seek a simpler and more meaningful connection with it all.

"My favorite interactions with art have been in human-scale settings where one can very closely explore a limited number of works," he writes. With the power to curate as he sees fit, Hill is following up the opening exhibition with one of his own.

"Accidental Path" is his series of photographs that highlights the immediacy and unpredictability of life. "Time may be conceived as a series of infinitesimal moments that, woven together, comprise our entire existence," he writes. "Unstaged and unedited, each (photo) reflects an instant already passed."

In other words, life is fleeting for us all. We yearn for personal growth all the time, but we can only find it through interpersonal connection. A lot of art is simply personal expression, but the best art is work that acts to connect us all together – not by coincidence or by fad, but by artistic intention.

In that sense art is not expression as much as it is interpretation. We're all in this together, the artist says, and this is what it looks like to me.

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MUSEUM OF MODERN LIFE OPENING RECEPTION

When: May 2, from 5 to 8 p.m.

Where: Museum of Modern Life (**4504 S.E. Milwaukie Ave.**)

Admission: Free

--Jamie Hale