THE ART OF THE BRICK

A LIFE IN LEGO®

NATHAN SAWAYA

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In Memory of Chloe Weil

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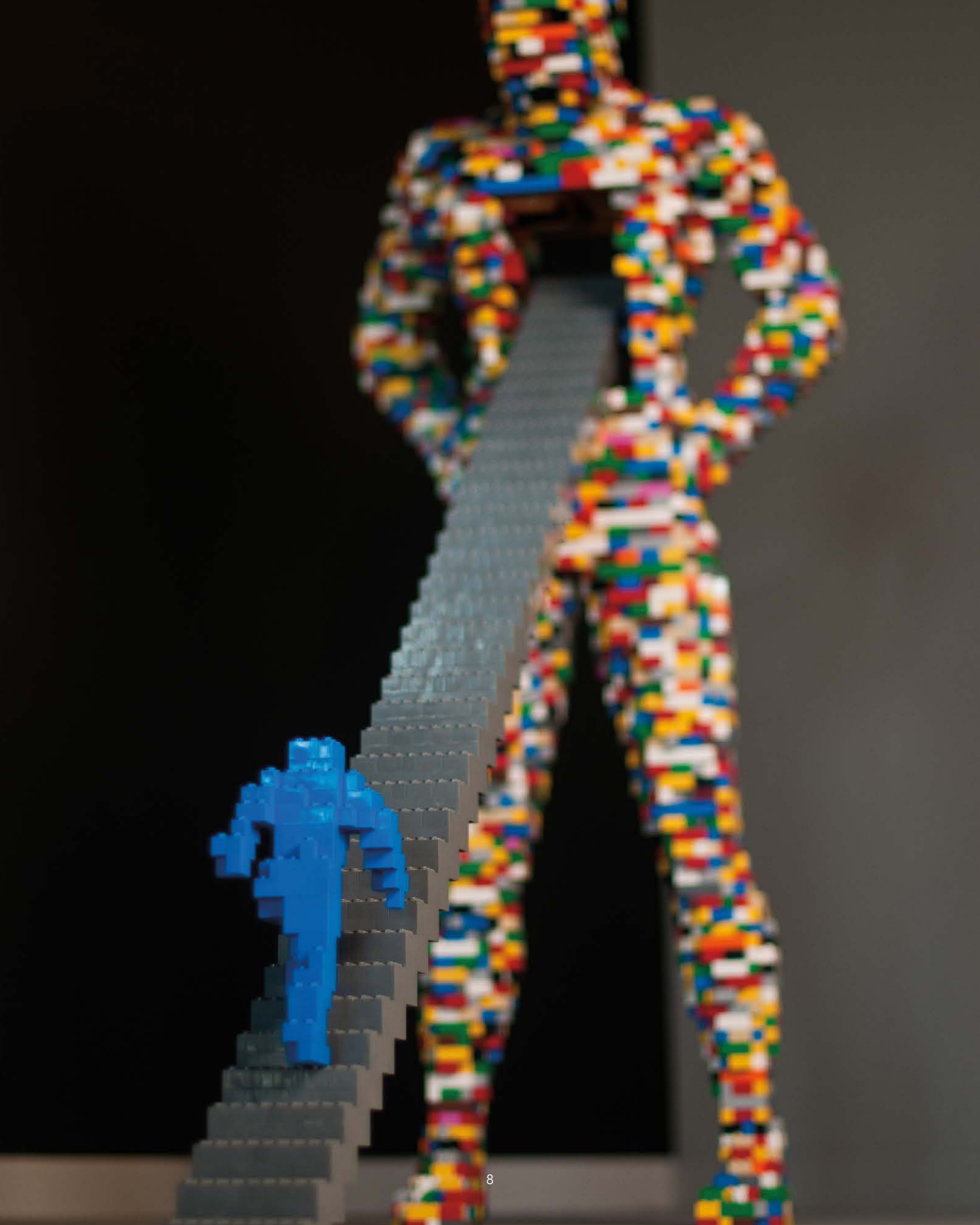


PREFACE

Some years ago I was a lawyer. But I never made a particularly happy lawyer. After a time, I decided what I really wanted to do with my life was make art. *So I quit, and I became a full-time artist.*

It was a big decision. But when I made the leap, I was prepared. I had already created what I felt were meaningful works of art, and I knew I could eventually make a living *creating art*.

What I wasn't prepared for was the opposition—from people I knew well, from acquaintances, and even from people I didn't know at all. During those first six months, I heard passing complaints and objections from people who held no stake in my life whatsoever.

I was told that I was crazy, that I was wrong, and that I was wasting my life. I won't lie, there were times when I worried the naysayers might be right. But just a few years after I quit, the complaints dried up.

Quitting your job to become an artist certainly isn't for everyone. But the creation of art should never be opposed. Not just because the world could do with more beautiful things, but because there's a mountain of evidence that shows that making art will improve your life in surprising ways.

Making art helps schoolchildren achieve significantly better math and science scores. Making art helps keep less advantaged kids in school, and art classes lower America's terrible dropout rate.

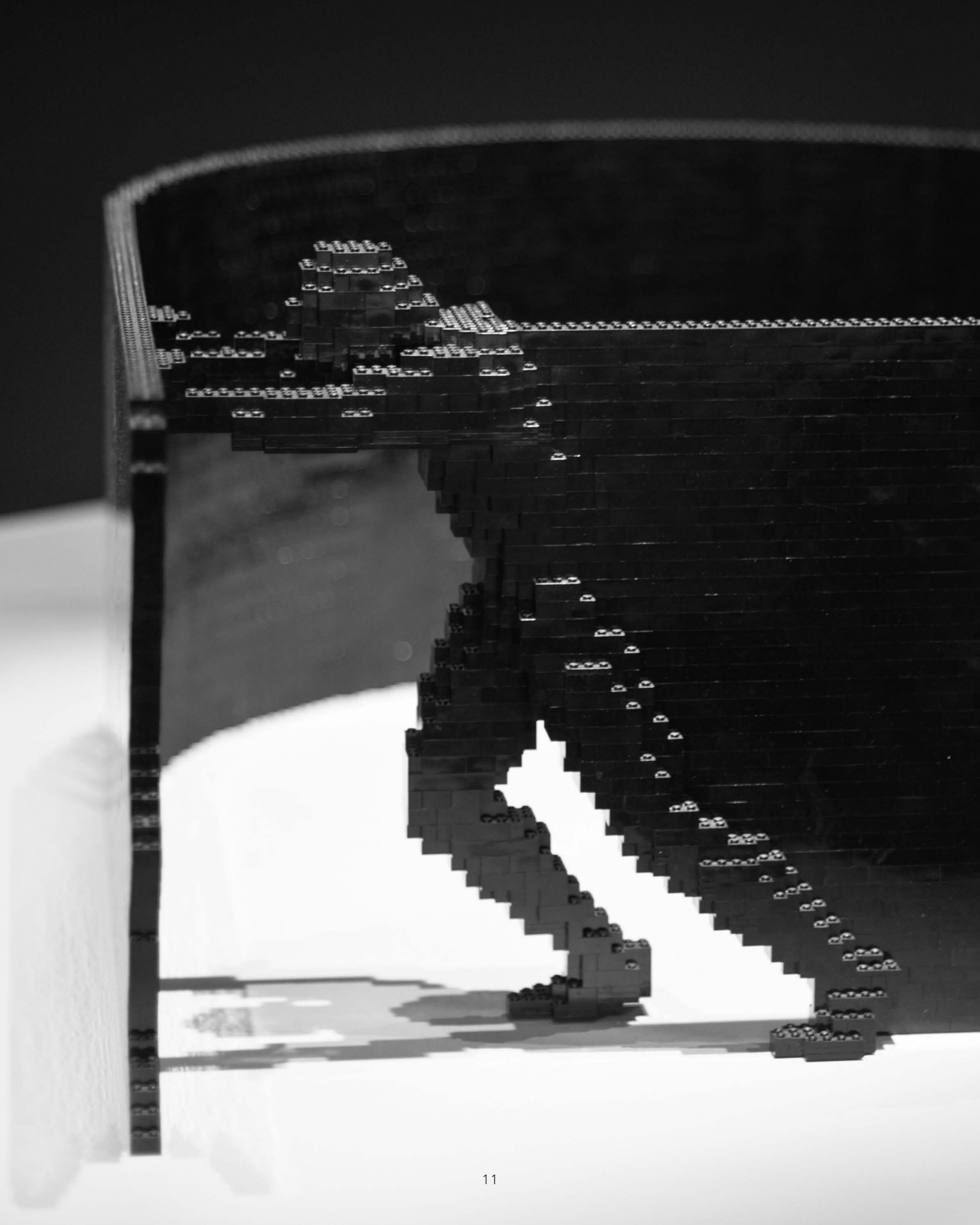
Making art builds self-esteem and self-awareness—qualities that aren't always in great supply, or at least aren't evenly distributed, in our society.

Making art helps combat depression, a shockingly common American condition suffered by nearly one-tenth of the population. Making art helps people manage serious illnesses like cancer and Alzheimer's.

Art is all around us, in commerce and in the creativity and imagination of the everyday.

Art is not optional. I'll say it again, in capital letters.

ART IS NOT OPTIONAL.



Perhaps that's not even a controversial opinion these days. But it bears repeating: art is necessary, vital, and indispensible. Not only to the personal happiness of a few odd ducks like myself, but to society as a whole.

I hope that this book serves as an inspiration to those *waiting to create*. Don't leave art until you have "more time." Do it now. If you are the kind of person who's too busy to make art, you're probably just the kind of person who should be making art.

All of us have creative thoughts, those urges and ideas that beg you to pick up a pen or brush or camera or even a LEGO brick. Creative ideas are gifts, like windows that open for just a short time. Art is in the here and now.

So take a look around, wherever you are. There's art there. *Do you see it?*

THE PLACES YOU'LL GO MASK

"Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting. So...get on your way." —Dr. Seuss

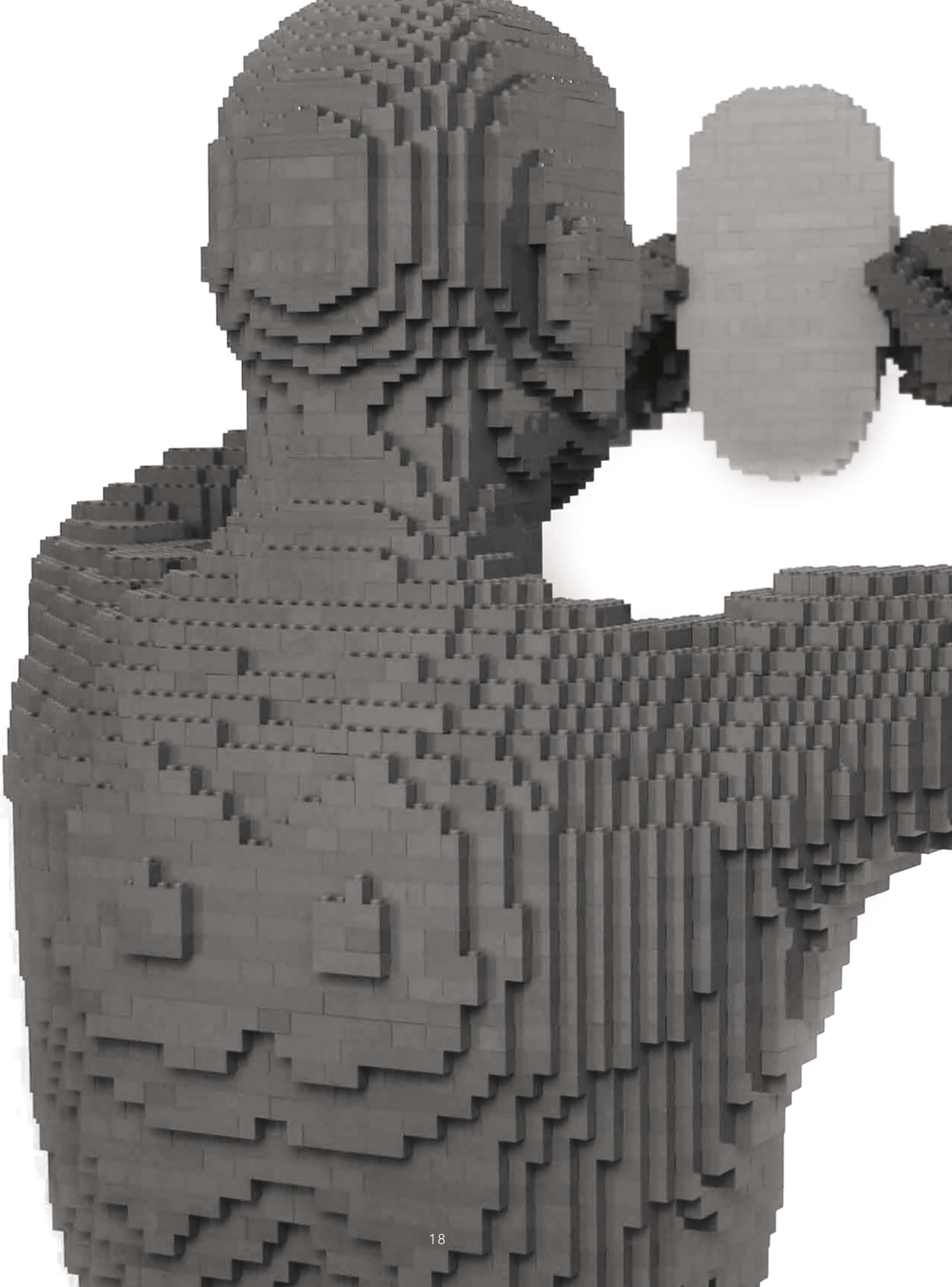
My father inherited a number of remarkable traits from his adoptive Lebanese American parents. One was an enthusiasm for Lebanese cooking: falafel, kibbeh, and infinite variations of barbecued meat. To this day, my dad, Dick, likes to construct elaborate meals from a battered, ancient Lebanese cookbook whose recipes often begin with instructions like "Step one: Slaughter the lamb."

Dad also inherited a love for baseball, and the New York Yankees in particular, from his father. Dad had an all-American childhood and loved his hometown hero Roger Maris.

I grew up with my dad and mom in Veneta, Oregon. We were a uniquely American blend: We were the only Sawayas there, for sure. We were one of many families in town who idolized Don Mattingly, but probably the only ones who could cook a passable shawarma.

We lived out of town a little, surrounded by forest. The nearest neighbor was more than a mile away. Dad worked for the National Forest Service as a civil engineer. Mainly he designed roads and bridges before moving into forest management and environmental protection. Growing up in Oregon, and having a guy like Dick for my dad, I had an outdoorsy kind of upbringing, with lots of hiking and looking for things in the forest. The first baseball game I ever saw was when my father drove me all the way to Seattle, where the Yankees were playing the Mariners.

The population of Veneta was, and remains, about 2,400. The town was so small that Veneta's kids had to ride the bus to the next town to attend Elmira High. The gas station was the town's big hangout for teenagers. The other place to be was the Dairy Queen. I ate hamburgers and an ice cream cone for lunch at the Dairy Queen nearly every day. But at night, the gas station was where the high schoolers collected, at a group of picnic tables. You'd get a soda or some Twinkies, and you could get a hot dog for 25 cents.

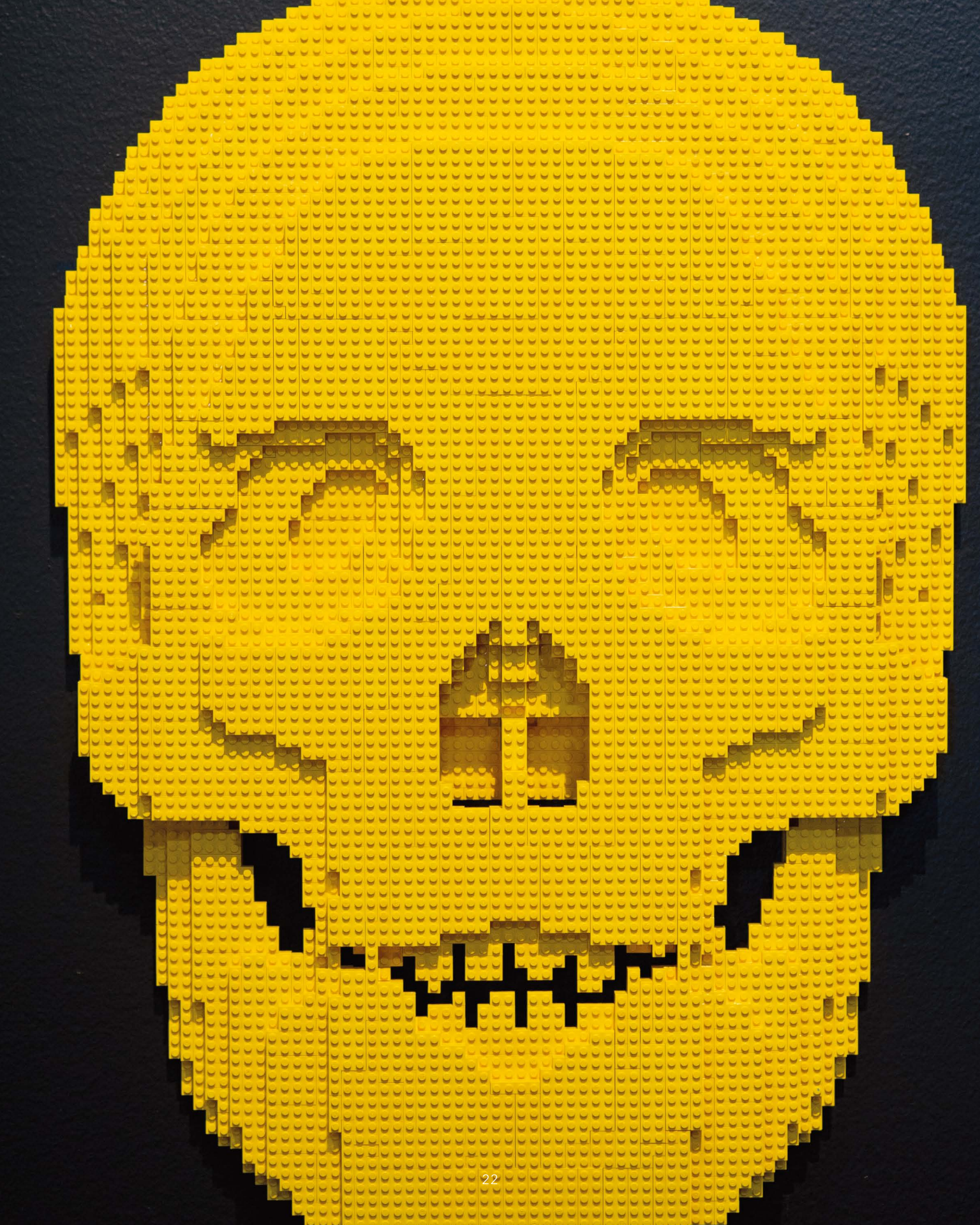


The thing about growing up in Veneta was that if you were born there, you tended to grow old there too. When I graduated, only three or four of us left the state to go to college.

I was my high school's valedictorian, and I gave a speech based on the Dr. Seuss book *Oh, the Places You'll Go*. I held up the book and read out some passages, and everyone laughed in all the right places.

But a lot of the people I used to hang out with at the gas station are still there, working in Veneta and drinking together on Friday nights. And when I go back now to visit my family, I wonder what sort of person I would have been had I stayed. How would I be different? Would I have pursued my art or just left it behind? I have no doubt that had I stayed in Veneta, I would be a different person.

I was thinking about Veneta and my family when I created *Mask*. Where does your identity come from? From your parents? From your team, your town, or your career? What things about ourselves are fixed, and what can change?



FIRST IMPRESSIONS SKULLS

Life's true face is the skull.
—Nikos Kazantzakis

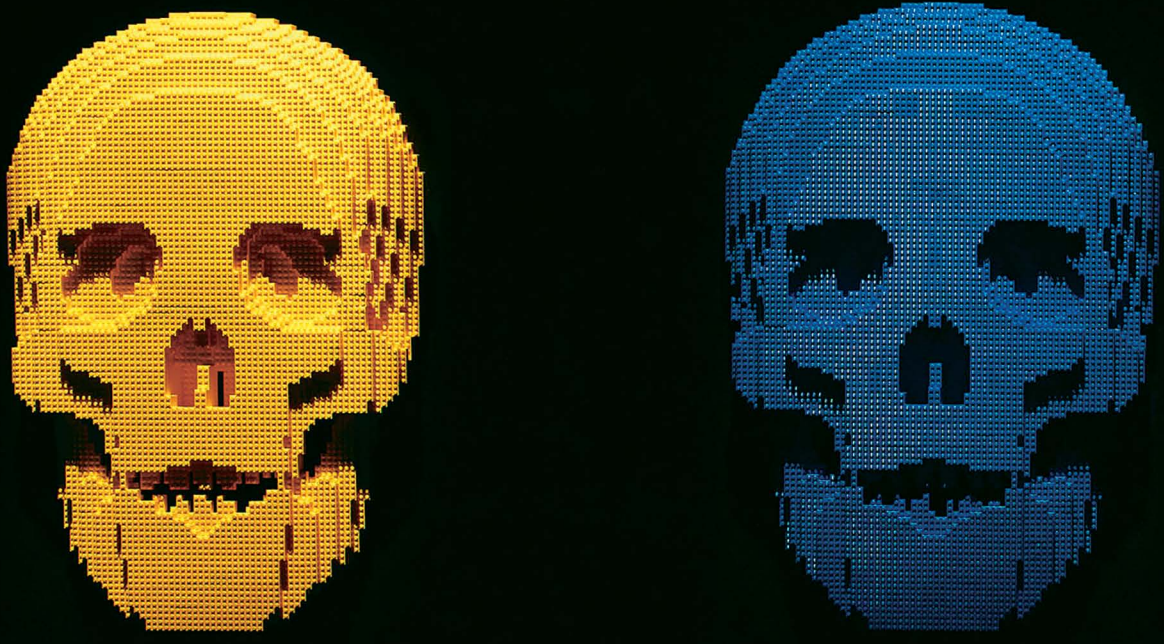
The first official contact I had with the LEGO Group was a cease and desist email. The company didn't like what I was doing and wanted me to stop doing it. The email I received seemed like a form letter, with only a vague sense of what I was actually attempting: creating original art, using LEGO bricks as a medium. I think they were more worried about my use of the term "LEGO" properly than my actual artwork.

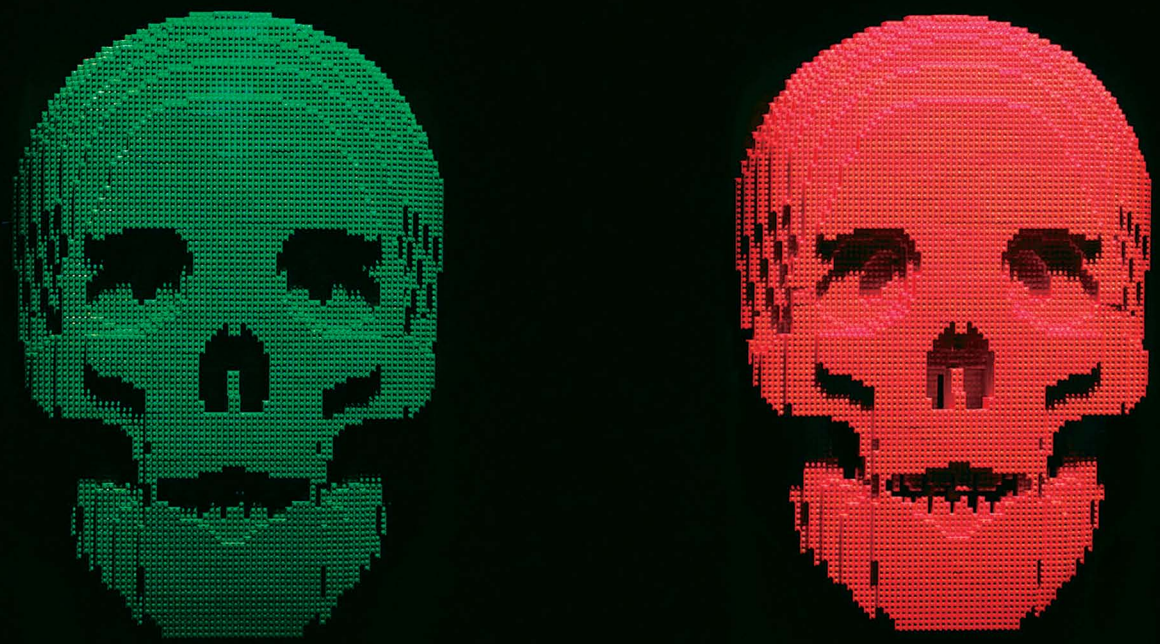
In any case, ceasing really wasn't part of my plan. It was fortunate that I happened to be an attorney at the time, and I was able to recognize the message for what it was.

Today, the LEGO Group and I have a much better relationship. But we've had some ups and downs. I built *Skulls* in a moment of frustration with the company. I wanted to do something that was "anti–childhood toy," that was about a really un-LEGO theme: death. I looked for precedent and found LEGO pirate sets with little skulls on the flags and little skeletons for haunted-castle sets. I even built *Skulls* in bright, happy LEGO colors—blue, yellow, green, and red. Every brick I pressed was like, "Take that . . . and that . . . and that!"

These days, I get together with the LEGO Group's leaders once a year. They talk about what the company's doing, and I talk about what I'm doing. We part as friends. The LEGO Group has a product, this fantastic children's toy and a wonderful brand, and the company wants to protect it. And I get where it's coming from, I really do.

I think in many ways, the LEGO Group has come to terms with its role as a medium of play and art. Just as a company that creates oil paints must celebrate oil painters, too, the LEGO Group has learned it has everything to gain from celebrating LEGO artists. After all, it's not just me these days, but a whole community of artists.





PATIENCE AND FORTITUDE LIONS

Patience and fortitude conquer all things. —Ralph Waldo Emerson

When I moved to New York to attend NYU in 1991, I was just a kid from a small town in Oregon. Like a lot of college students, I didn't have a whole lot of cash, so I had to get a job. I worked my way through college at a marketing research firm. As part of a small team of twentysomethings, I found information for marketing groups so that they could devise their advertising strategies.

We uncovered the latest trends in instant coffee, what people wanted from a AA battery, and how many chocolate chips were in the average chocolate chip cookie. All the stuff you just jam into Google these days, that's the stuff we used to look for. But in 1991, Larry Page and Sergey Brin were still in high school, so we found our information the old-fashioned way—at the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue.

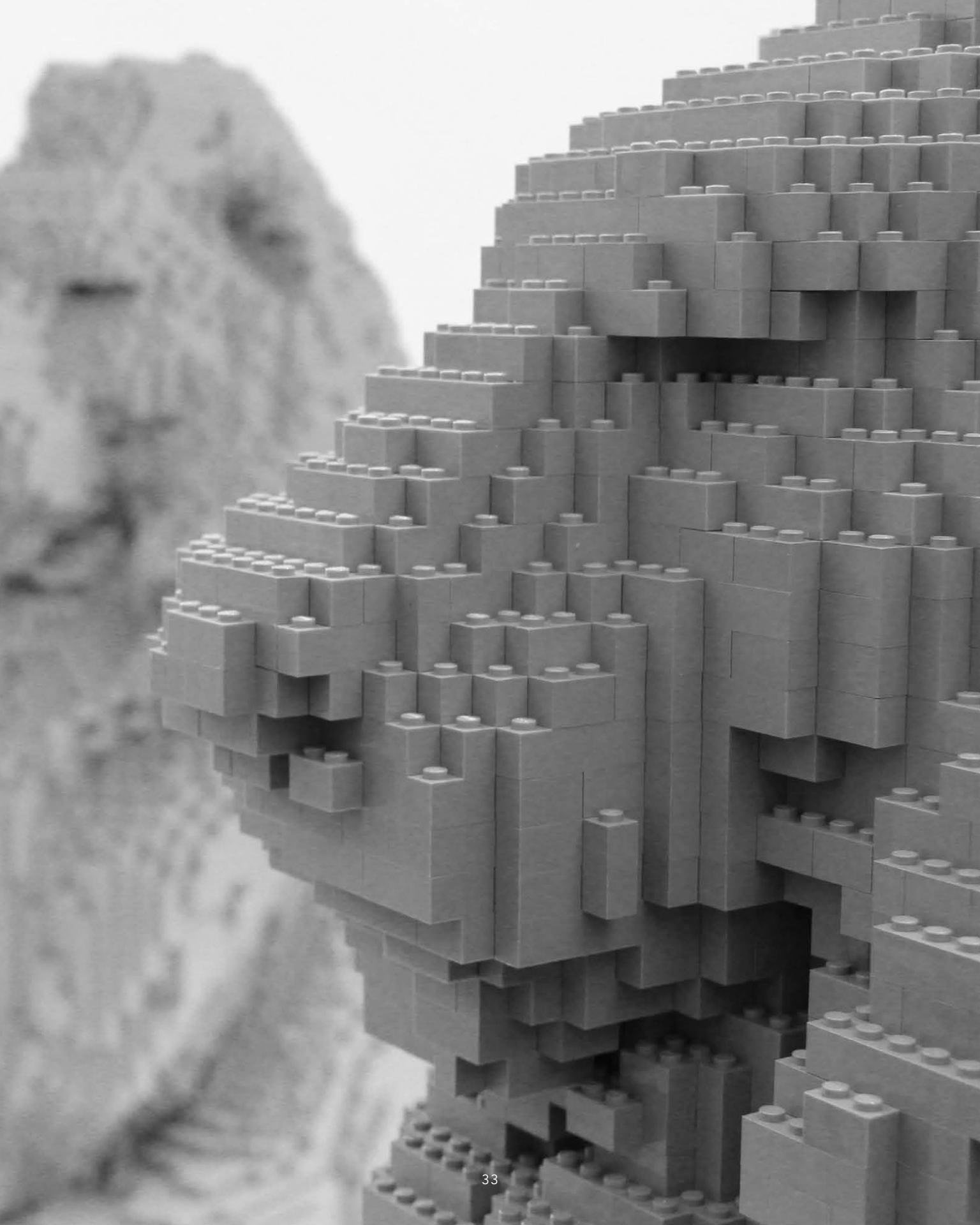
A lot of the research was pretty dreary. But no matter how inconsequential my research mission was, I always got a buzz out of walking up the steps into the library. Inside, it was just so grand. You felt like you shouldn't have the right to be in there. The massive windows and chandeliers of the Rose Main Reading Room were surely the private domain of social notables and scholars, rather than freely accessible to a student looking for tidbits on cat-food flavors. Not only was the architecture and interior gorgeous, but the library itself was "full service." You couldn't just go pick up a book; you had to request that it be brought from the stack to you.

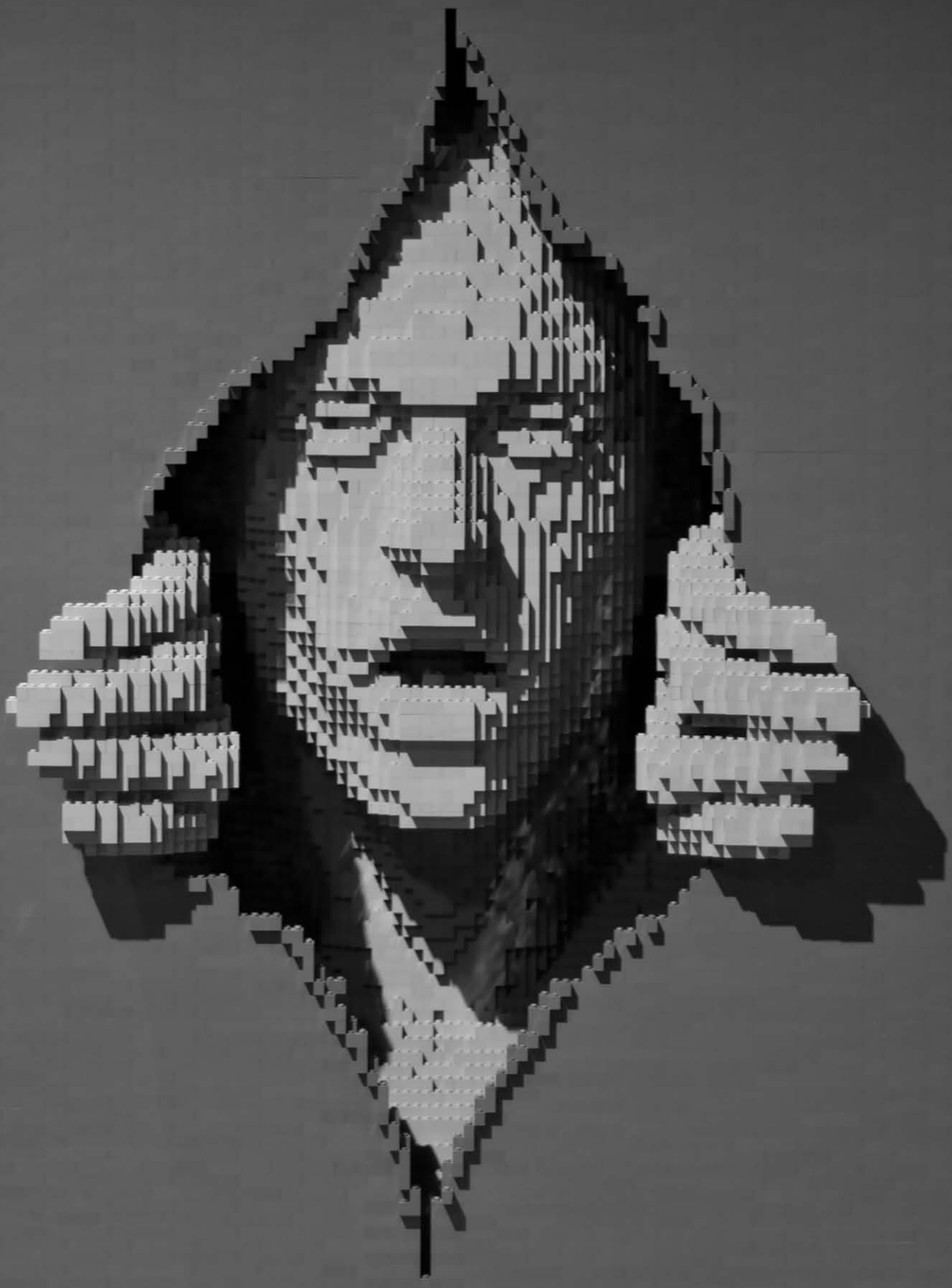
I loved the place. So when I got a call 20 years later to help celebrate the New York Public Library's turning 100 years old, I was pretty excited. This excitement faded a little when they emailed me and asked, "Could you do a rendition of the exterior of the Public Library building?" I thought that was the most boring commission ever. I mean, it's a nice-enough building to look at. But in a simple miniaturization, there'd be no discovery or wonder or awe—all the things that the library contained, all the things that the library was for me. So I said, "Let me get back to you," and thought of what the library meant to me.


Smell Flowers
Not Smoke

If you've ever visited, you'll know that flanking each side of the library steps is a great lion carved from pink Tennessee marble. On the south side of the steps lies Patience, while guarding the north end is Fortitude. The lions were named for the qualities that New Yorkers characteristically displayed in times of adversity. For the hundred years of their existence, Patience and Fortitude had been an integral part of city life, witnessing innumerable parades, wearing Mets and Yankees caps to celebrate World Series wins, and standing strong in 100 million tourist photographs. For New Yorkers, they're as much a symbol of the city as the Brooklyn Bridge.

So I pitched the idea of doing replicas of the lions, these wise sentinels that had been watching me come and go for nearly two decades. Happily, the powers that be at the library agreed, and my re-creations were unveiled on the steps 100 years to the day after the original marble lions were presented to the public. As of this writing, the LEGO lions still sit in the library lobby, majestically guarding the entrance and, I hope, simultaneously inspiring some young minds that are experiencing them for the first time.





OUT OF THE DARKNESS GRAY

"Write it. Shoot it. Publish it. Crochet it, sauté it, whatever. Make.—Joss Whedon

I suffer from depression. I have tried a lot of different methods to stem my depression. I have tried more exercise. I have tried less sleeping. I have tried more sleeping. But the one thing that helps me beat depression the most is creating art.

When I am creating art I can keep going. Maybe it is because it gives me a goal, or maybe it just takes my brain to a different place. Making art makes me happy. I have said it before and I will say it again: We all need to create more art. I'm not saying you need to spend three months on a life-size dinosaur skeleton replica. Maybe just try some painting at the beach. Maybe some finger-painting with your kids. Maybe just some doodling at your desk. But just keep creating. Creating art, just a little a day, just a little a week, will make you happier.

UNFAMILIAR PLACES
RED DRESS

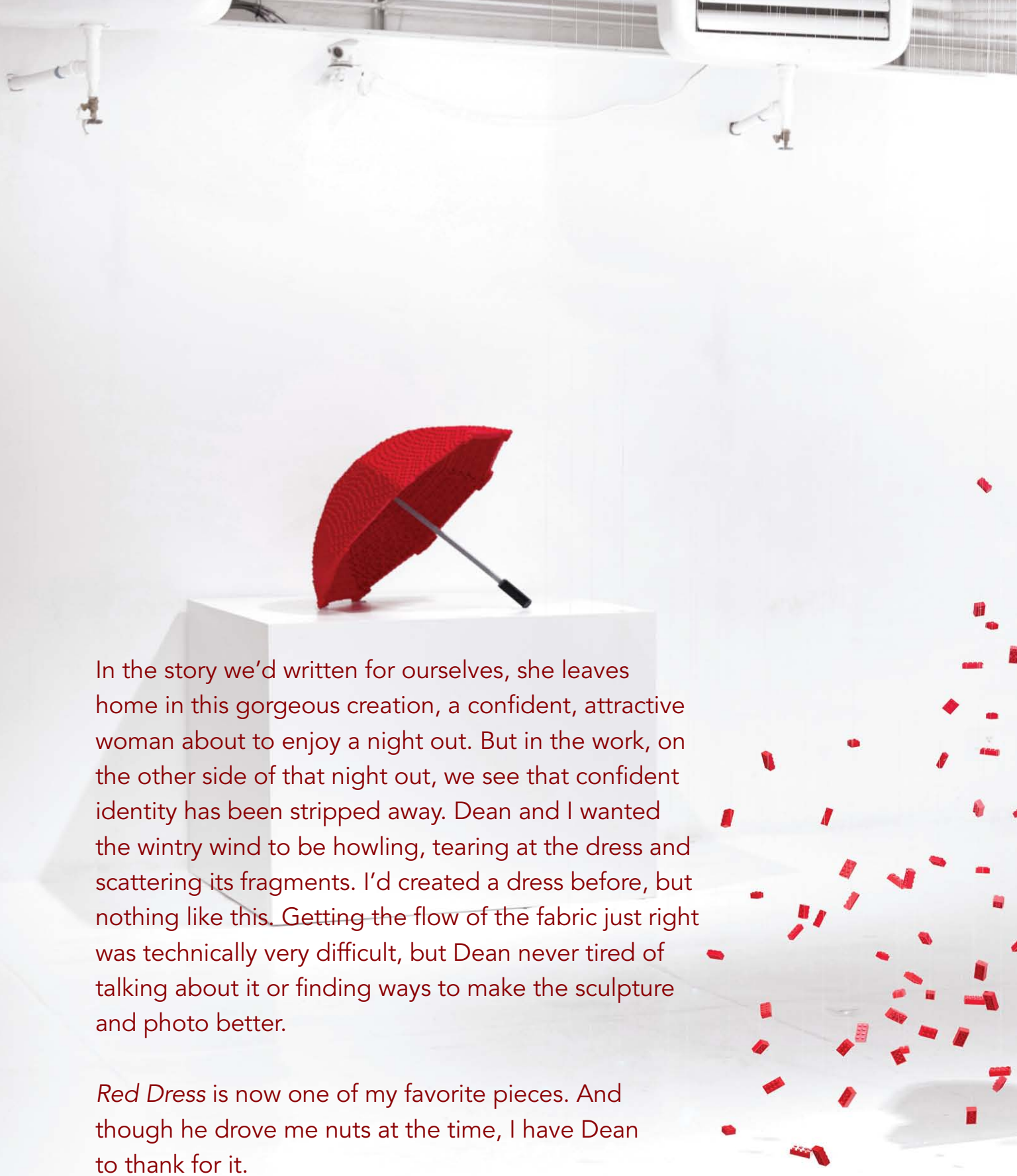
When in doubt, wear red.
—Bill Blass

One morning, I awoke to a strange email in my inbox. It was a photographer who wanted to collaborate on a project. Based in Brisbane, Australia, this Dean West had suggested mixing my LEGO sculptures into his own hyperrealistic photographs. Because I get many invitations like this and most of them come to nothing, I emailed back saying, "If you're serious, come to New York," and then promptly forgot about it. To my surprise, two weeks later, Dean was knocking on my door with a hundred ideas and no time to waste. The collaboration became our *In Pieces* series.

Working with Dean forced me into places I don't usually go. Normally, I sit in a room by myself, surrounded by dozens of boxes of bricks arranged by color and shape. It's a familiar space. I can reach for the next thing I need without looking, and the ideas flow through my fingers automatically. I have my

sketches, which I generally don't share with anyone else; most of what I'm looking for is in my head. But with Dean, over the course of several years, I found myself driving thousands of Nevada miles to find the precise kind of fencing he wanted, talking down a disgruntled motel owner brandishing a shotgun, standing on a studio rooftop dressed as a cowboy (the talent hadn't shown up for the shoot), and taking photos of a Los Angeles storefront at four in the morning because we couldn't afford the official permits.

Dean's photography gave my sculpture a context it doesn't usually have. In the case of *Red Dress*, that context was a near-desolate cinema on a winter night. The girl in the red dress is alone, maybe abandoned. The kid in the ticket booth is there, but protected from the elements by a pane of glass. A red light, perhaps from a departing car, glows from the bottom-right corner.



In the story we'd written for ourselves, she leaves home in this gorgeous creation, a confident, attractive woman about to enjoy a night out. But in the work, on the other side of that night out, we see that confident identity has been stripped away. Dean and I wanted the wintry wind to be howling, tearing at the dress and scattering its fragments. I'd created a dress before, but nothing like this. Getting the flow of the fabric just right was technically very difficult, but Dean never tired of talking about it or finding ways to make the sculpture and photo better.

Red Dress is now one of my favorite pieces. And though he drove me nuts at the time, I have Dean to thank for it.


ON
THE
RUN

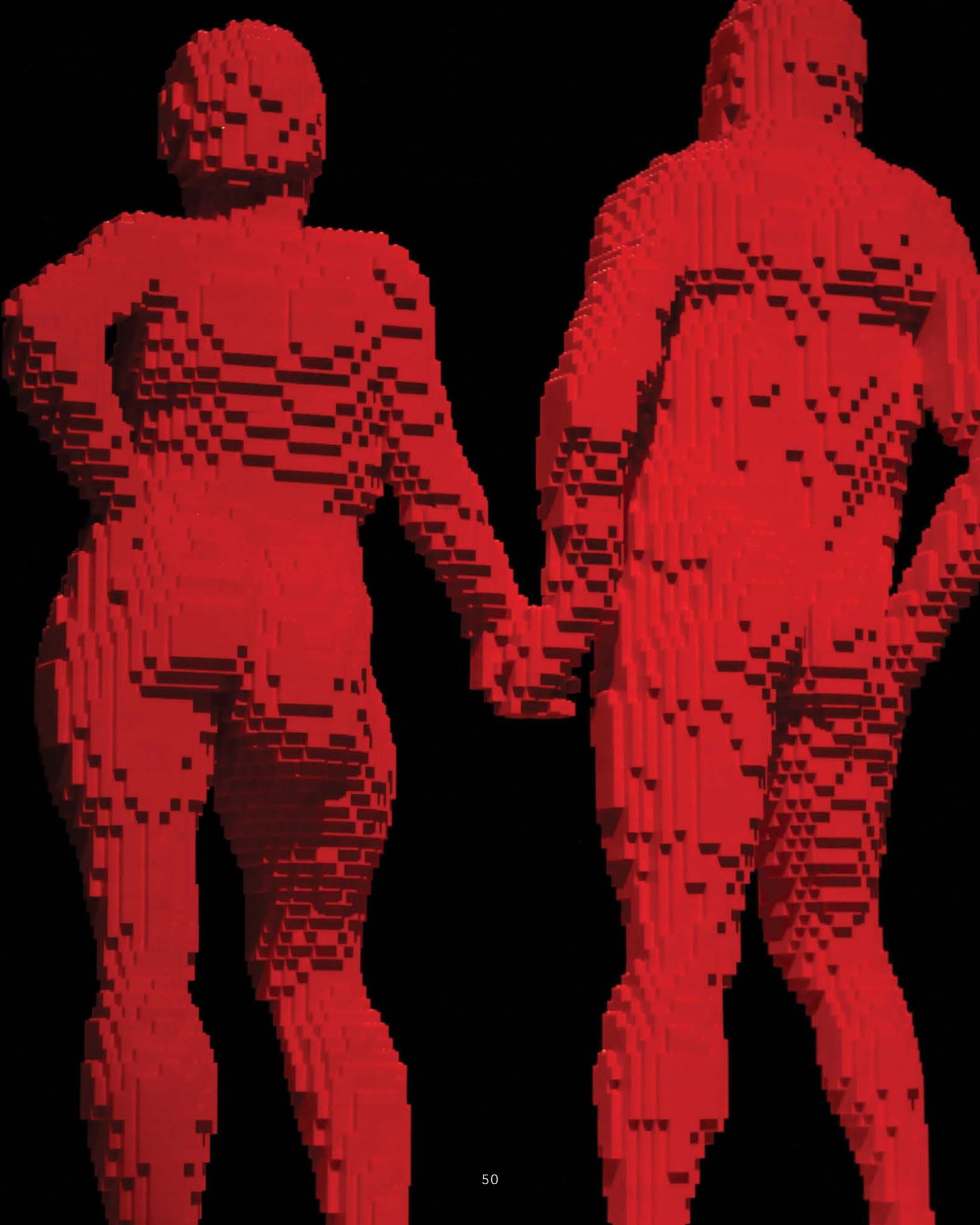
THE BLUES SING

I am the one,
Holding the clouds,
Drinking the rain,
Until I drown me out.
—"By July" by Sirsy

I typically have to sketch, worry, and sweat over a sculpture to complete it. Not many pieces come to me fully formed. But *Sing* did, in a bar, of all places, while I was listening to my friend Melanie sing the blues with her band, Sirsy. She was singing a song called "By July," and I instantly had an idea for *Sing* that I jotted on a napkin.

And yet, in one of those strange fights over artistic inspiration, my wife's daughter Blair remains convinced that her face is *Sing's* inspiration. I started on *Sing* a few nights after Blair's debut in a school musical, and I've never had the courage to tell her that it was really my friend Melanie.

The more I look at the sculpture now, the more it looks like Blair. I'm not really sure whose face it is anymore!



THE OLDER I GET EVERLASTING

After graduating from NYU, I stayed in New York and went to work at the law firm Winston & Strawn. Having spent my childhood in small towns, living in one of the busiest, most frantic, and most crowded cities in the world was still amazing to me. In New York, the sidewalks were filled with people you'd never know, and the anonymity took getting used to.

One morning while getting my coffee on the way to work, I saw something that really jumped out at me: a couple in their late 60s just standing there, holding hands, as the crowds surged all around them. They weren't in a rush to go anywhere. They had no career to build. No fortune to make. No deadline to meet. No billable hours. They had each other, and you could tell that was the most important thing to them.

Maybe they were a retired couple whose kids had left home. Maybe they were from out of town, on vacation. But what struck me the most was the way the couple transcended New York, ignoring its demands to be in a rush, to always be leaving to go somewhere better. It was like their everlasting love had put them in a bubble.

At the time, I was making LEGO sculptures in the evenings to reduce the stress in my life. I couldn't do complex human forms, not yet. So the image was filed away, and my mind moved on to other things.

When I met Courtney, now my wife, the transcendent couple came back, and I was inspired to build them. When we get old, I like to think Courtney and I will still be standing on sidewalks, holding hands. So when I look at *Everlasting* now, there's a little bit of the old couple mixed up with a little bit of us.

And you know something? The older I get, the more I like this piece.

CREATE AND RELEASE HUGMAN

People say graffiti is ugly, irresponsible, and childish. But that's only if it's done properly. —Banksy

One day, when I was in the first grade, every kid in my school received a red helium balloon with a long string tied to it and a little card attached. We were asked to write out our school's address on these cards with a note reading, "Wherever this lands, please write me back." So we all went down to an open field. There were three or four classes in each grade, so easily 500 students down there, all holding these red balloons with names, addresses, and notes. There was a countdown, of course. Three . . . two . . . one . . . and suddenly 500 red balloons were in the air at once, rising up, up into the blue sky, like a great red blanket.

I remember standing there, watching them disappear into little red pinpricks. And then they were gone. We spent the rest of the day talking about where they might land. California, New York, Mexico, Peru?

And what I liked, and what stuck with me until years later when I created *Hugman*, was this idea that you can make something, then release it—send it off on its own adventure from which it might, or might not, one day return to you.

So I've made dozens, maybe hundreds, of *Hugmen* and left them all around the world, wherever I happen to be. I've left them all across the United States, in Australia, Singapore, Taiwan. In parks, on benches, hidden in bushes, or locked onto the wheels of parked bicycles. I just set 'em up and leave them there. More often than not, the *Hugman* lasts for just an hour or so, a transient piece of the city's landscape. And then I'm like the little kid looking up at the sky and wondering, "Where did that red balloon get to?"

Back at school, about a month after the balloon release, one of the kids got an anonymous postcard from a state or two away, which read, "I got your balloon. Hi, how are you?" The principal got up in front of the whole school and read this postcard, and everyone just went crazy. It was the only one that came back, but for me, that was enough.


COWBOY

IT'S COMPLICATED DOORWAY

When I met the woman who is now my wife, it was complicated. Courtney had three kids and a booming PR career, and she was going through a protracted divorce. I was this guy who'd just become the guy who used to be a lawyer and was now a LEGO artist. So while there was no doubt in either of our minds that the other was The One, it was hard to share that information with anyone else. What do you tell the kids? What do you tell the friends and family? It just seemed easier to keep it to ourselves and tell no one. Because we were trying to hide our relationship, I had to put on this happy, smiley, we're-just-friends persona to face the world. It was only when the world had averted its gaze that I could sneak out the back door and be with the one I loved and feel everything I was feeling.

It was a confusing, desperate, exasperating time, one that drove a lot of my work. During this period, I made *Caged Heart*, *Loves Me Not*, *Doorway*, and others.

When I was making *Doorway*, I was using Courtney's garage in San Diego as a studio. It was hot outside, so I had the garage door rolled up two or three feet off the ground to let a bit of airflow in. I had been on some late-night TV show the night before, where I'd been talking about quitting my job to do LEGO sculptures.

Courtney's daughter Delaney was in high school, and her history teacher had seen the show. He said, "Listen, kids, I saw this guy who quit his job to follow his passion, and I only hope that you guys follow your passions the same way."

And Delaney, kind of unimpressed, raises her hand and says, "Yeah, he's in my garage right now."

So I'm making this piece, *Doorway*, about all this deep emotional stuff and the angst of stifled love, and I've got 15 girls poking their heads under the garage door, yelling, "He's in there, he's in there; I can see him!"

CAPILLARIES
RED TREE

The reaction to my first exhibition was overwhelming, and in the weeks that followed, I was in a constant state of euphoria. On the way back to the hotel after the show, I proclaimed to Courtney that I wanted to build *everything* and that I could build *anything* out of LEGO bricks. Right there in front of the hotel was this striking tree covered in twinkling lights. It was illuminated. It was so *alive*.

And at that point, I was inspired to create its antithesis. The image of a deciduous tree that's lost all of its leaves reminds us of winter, of the life falling from its limbs. Essentially, a bare tree reminds us of death. But we know the tree *isn't* dead. It still has life within, beneath the surface, that just lies dormant until the spring. When I look at the tree, I don't see the loss of life, but the veins of a new tree ready to explode.

WRITE AND WRONG THE WRITER

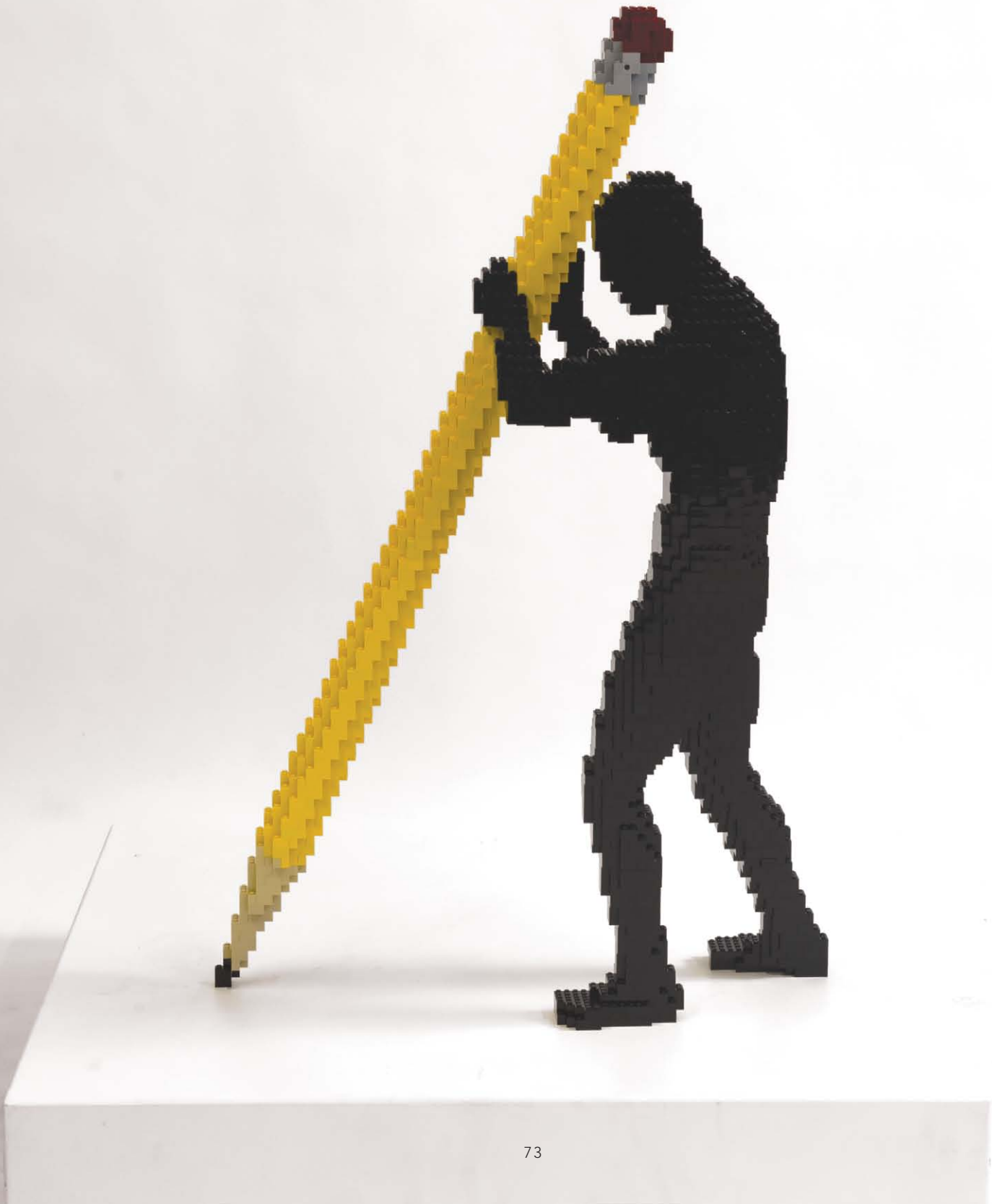
Don't bend; don't water it down; don't try to make it logical; don't edit your own soul according to the fashion. Rather, follow your most intense obsessions mercilessly. —Franz Kafka

Seeking out the truth is something of a family pastime. My grandfather on my mother's side, Jack Swenson, was a legendary midwestern journalist who made the switch from radio to television without a hitch. In the '50s and '60s, millions of people relied on him to tell them the way things were. My mother, too, worked as a journalist—for the *West Lane News*, a weekly newspaper in Veneta. Tuesdays were always the nights we wouldn't see her, because they went to print that night. She didn't get home until two or three in the morning, and I was long since asleep. Tuesday was the night the paper went to bed.

Since my grandfather was a journalist and my mom was a journalist, it seemed like a good thing for me to do too. In high school, I was editor of the school paper. I had a great journalism teacher, Anne Johnson, who'd always encourage me and stay behind to help me put together the paper. We covered all the sorts of things that thousands of small-town school papers do: sports, achievements, staff changes. But in my mind I was like my grandfather or my mom, a warrior for truth in a world of fuzzy gray deceit.

Once, and I can't remember what the story was, I had to have a meeting with the vice principal, who wanted me to wait for his approval before running a story. My response was something like "This is ridiculous! No one can tell me what to write! I'm taking this to the Supreme Court." Little did I know that the Supreme Court had already ruled that punk teenage editors of high school newspapers could be restrained by vice principals!

I thought I would go into television, like my grandfather. When I first went to NYU, it was to study journalism, and I packed my bags with all the passion for the truth that I could muster. And though I left behind that journalistic life many years ago, I now look to my artwork as my contribution to finding the truth, distinguishing right from wrong, and following in the family footsteps.



BLOOD AND BLUBBER DINOSAUR

There are two kinds of teachers: the kind that fill you with so much quail shot that you can't move, and the kind that just gives you a little prod behind and you jump to the skies. —Robert Frost

I had my first solo show in April 2007. It was at the Lancaster Museum of Art, in the rural and Amish town in central Pennsylvania.

At the time the museum contacted me, I thought, "Wow, what an honor," with the simultaneous thought that it would likely also be my last solo show. It was early in my career, and I hadn't yet built up confidence in what I was doing.

I didn't know what to expect, and I was a nervous wreck. We had this whole sequence planned where my family was going to fly in and see the show first at 5 PM before it opened to the public at 6 PM. Since I never expected to do another solo show, I called all

my friends and invited them. So they were all there, but I never thought anyone else would come.

At about noon that day, the director of the museum called and said, "You're not going to be happy, but I've started letting people in. It's freezing outside, and they're queued up around the corner."

I was stunned. Usually the gallery saw 35,000 visitors in a year, but my show had 25,000 in six weeks. The Amish came, with their buggies and beards.

What blew me away most of all was that these nine-year-olds came walking through. The show drew in many families and people who'd never come to an art museum before. Kids were asking me for autographs in Lancaster cafés . . . it was bizarre. I was so overwhelmed by the reaction to the show that I wanted to give something back to the kids. So, in May of that year, I started building *Dinosaur.*

I began creating a skeleton, something like you might find in a natural-history museum. I was lucky in that I had some serious experience in the subject. I had a middle school science teacher named Al James—Mr. James, at the time—who was an amazing teacher and would always go the extra mile.


G
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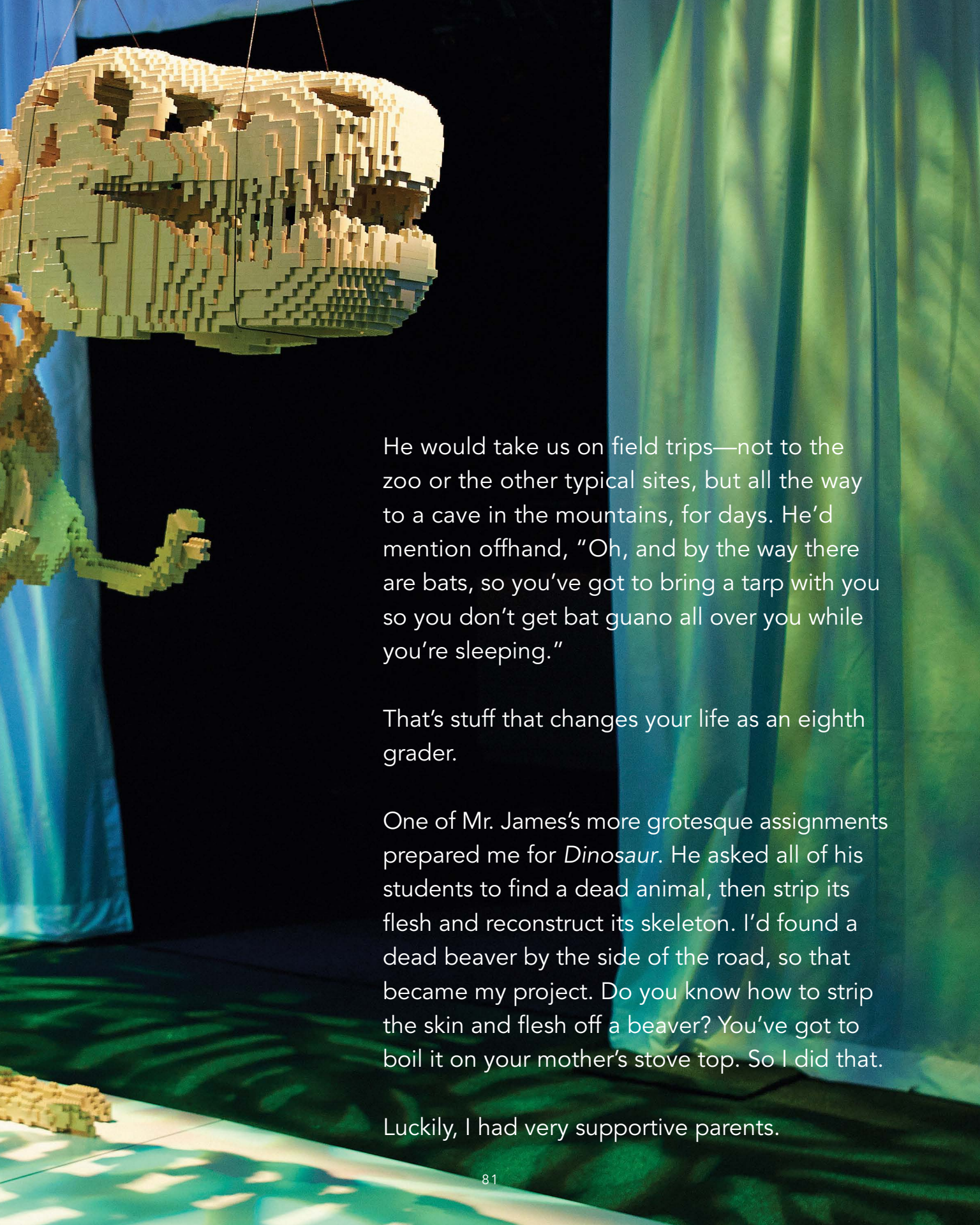


He would take us on field trips—not to the zoo or the other typical sites, but all the way to a cave in the mountains, for days. He'd mention offhand, "Oh, and by the way there are bats, so you've got to bring a tarp with you so you don't get bat guano all over you while you're sleeping."

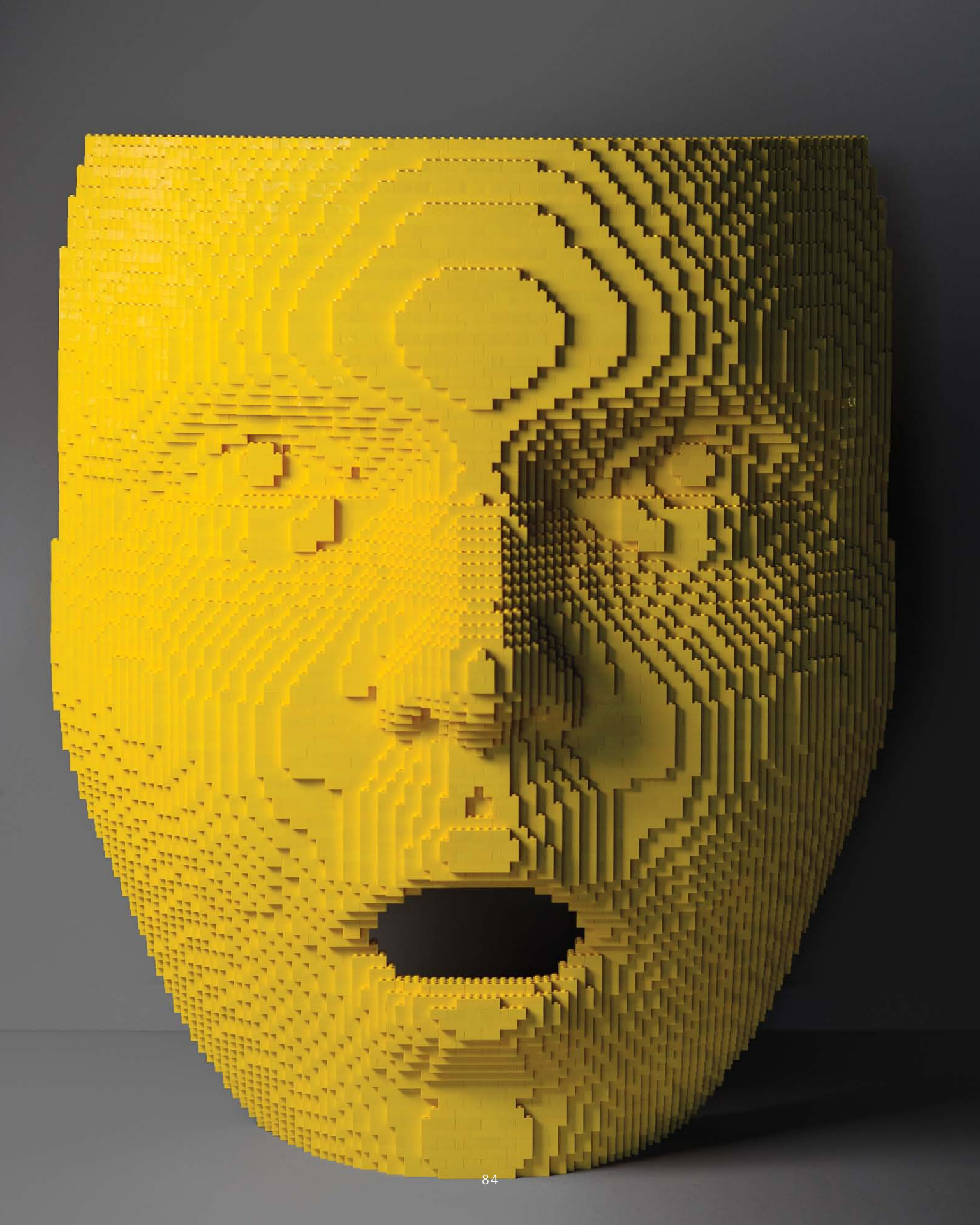
That's stuff that changes your life as an eighth grader.

One of Mr. James's more grotesque assignments prepared me for *Dinosaur*. He asked all of his students to find a dead animal, then strip its flesh and reconstruct its skeleton. I'd found a dead beaver by the side of the road, so that became my project. Do you know how to strip the skin and flesh off a beaver? You've got to boil it on your mother's stove top. So I did that.

Luckily, I had very supportive parents.

I went along with Mr. James, in the summer of ’88, to the Oregon Institute of Marine Biology on a summer course. Most of my job was reconstructing a skeleton from a dead California sea lion for a museum. The Institute had a walk-in freezer, like a butcher’s freezer, and inside there was a whale carcass, a great white shark, and a few sea lions. Now, sea lions are pretty big, and they’re covered in blubber, which you’ve got to cut off with a chainsaw. (You could euphemistically call this step a dirty job.) Then you’ve got to boil the body in giant cauldrons so all the flesh falls off, and finally you’ve got to piece all the bones together again to make the skeleton.

That summer, I completed the reconstruction of the sea lion’s skeleton, and I also did a brown pelican. I hope they’re still in natural-history museums somewhere. So when it came to *Dinosaur*, I knew what it took to create a skeleton. It took me about three months to do *Dinosaur*—about the same time it took me to do the sea lion!



ARRIVING AT CONJUNCTION JUNCTION YELLOW MASK

To me, the face in this sculpture is Will, Courtney's son. This piece was done in about 2008, and the expression on Will's face is just how he always looks to me.

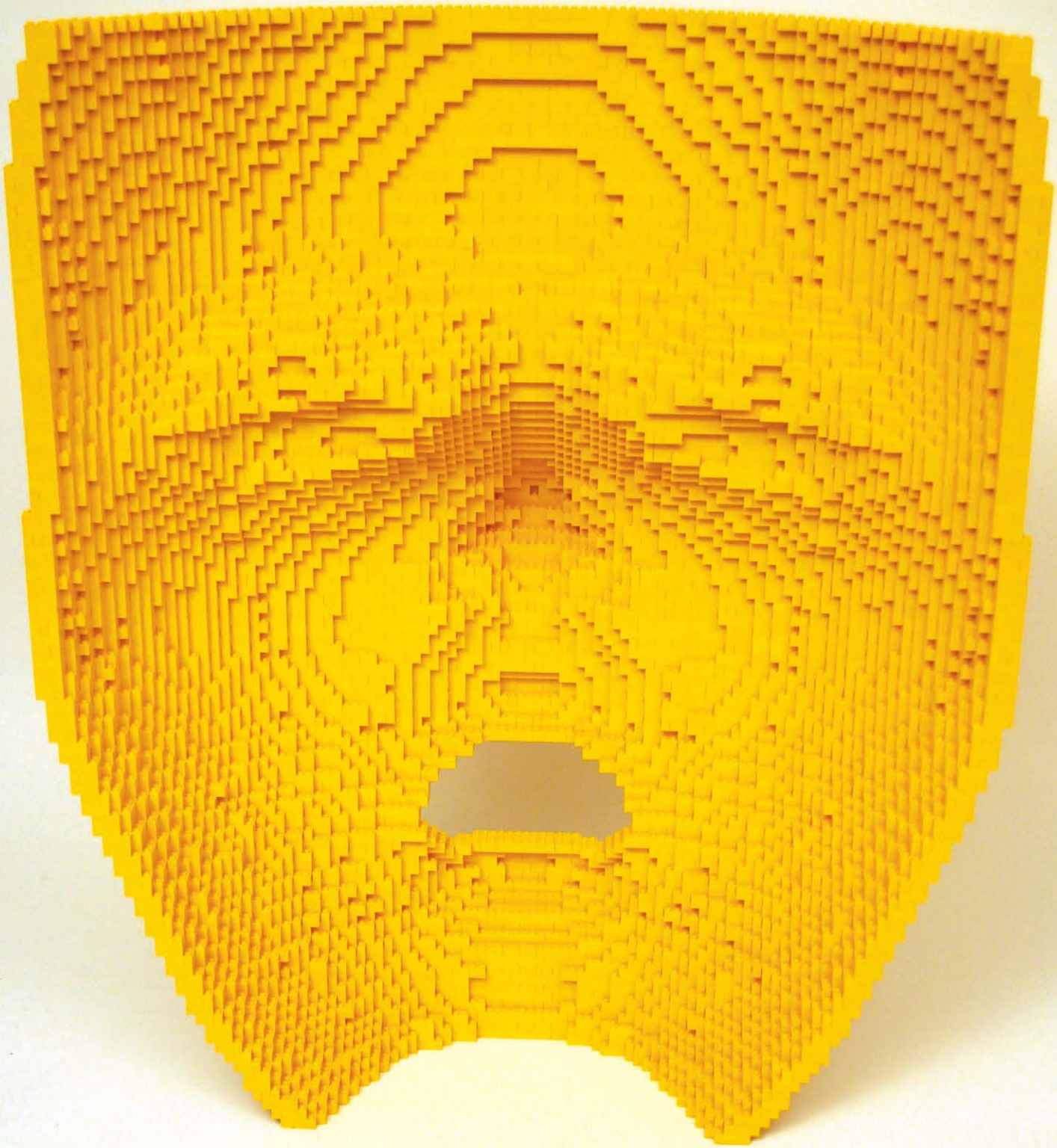
When I first met Courtney, Will was about 4 and I was 30. Despite my age, I hadn't really spent a lot of time with kids. I'd been a student, I'd been a lawyer, and I had just declared to the world that I'd become an artist. But I wasn't a father or uncle, and few of my friends in the city had started families. I was leading a simple and self-indulgent life of bachelor bliss when along comes this beautiful woman and her three equally beautiful children, Delaney, Blair, and Will.

Early in our relationship, I watched Will while Courtney ran some errands. The last time I'd spent

any real time with a four-year-old, I was probably one myself. So what did I like doing when I was that age? I recalled that I really liked *Schoolhouse Rock!*. So Will and I sat down and watched back-to-back-to-back episodes. We sang "Three Is a Magic Number" and "A Noun Is a Person, Place, or Thing." We learned about the words *and*, *but*, and *or* during "Conjunction Junction." We oohed and aahed at the cigar-chomping, pool hall–hustling fat cat in "Naughty Number Nine." After a couple of hours the door opened, and Will rushed out and said, "Mom, I know what an adjective is!"

I was feeling pretty good about my parenting skills right then. I was thinking that, maybe with enough DVD box sets, I could really master this thing. I had a lot yet to learn, and Will taught me so much.

Ten years on, it takes more than a rerun of a '70s kids' program to hold Will's attention. He lives with us in Los Angeles and goes to high school, plays soccer, talks in monosyllabic grunts, and does all the usual teenage boy stuff. He's also a pretty good artist himself, and he loves all things film. Unsurprisingly, he holds no interest in LEGO creations whatsoever.




The Art of the Brick
MORE THAN A MUSEUM
Discovery
TIMES SQUARE
Nathan Sawaya
AÉROPOSTALE
W 45 St
ONE WAY
BUBBA GUMP

THE LEAP
YELLOW

"Look on every exit as being an entrance somewhere else. —Tom Stoppard

I had a lot of things on my mind the day I planned to leave the law firm in 2004, not least of which was my resignation speech. But whatever room was left over was taken up by the idea for *Yellow*. More than anything else, *Yellow* was the idea that made it impossible for me to continue living as I was, and forced me to make the leap to pursue my art full time. I sketched *Yellow* out on memo pads, Winston & Strawn stationery, drink coasters, restaurant receipts, and tablecloths hundreds of times before I actually built it.

Yellow is also one of those pieces whose meaning has changed for me over time. When I dreamed it up, it was part of a trilogy representing birth, life, and death. *Yellow* was death, a man tearing himself apart and seeing his vital essence spilling out on the ground before him. Originally, I wanted organs coming out too—really graphic stuff.

But in the two years it took to translate the idea into a finished work, the guts stopped being guts and became just bricks. And once it appeared in shows, *Yellow* began to be seen as a standalone piece, represented on posters and book covers and websites without its companions, *Blue (birth)* and *Red (life)*, to provide context.

I think now, with the benefit of a decade's hindsight, that *Yellow* is not about death at all, but about opening yourself up to the world without fear or reserve. It's about dropping the mask and the hundreds of little compromises you make every day to show the world the true you, and letting life come at you as it may.

The frustrations and anxieties I felt when I lived a lawyer's life were never the result of privation or lack of opportunity. Quite the opposite: I was presented with choices, and I made the "right" one every time. Somehow, after making all those "right" choices, I ended up in the wrong place. So I decided to make a wrong choice instead. And I have *Yellow* to thank for that.

YOU'RE CRAZY
GRASP

When someone tells me "no," it doesn't mean I can't do it, it simply means I can't do it with them. —Karen E. Quinones Miller

I knew I had it pretty good as a lawyer. I knew that I would have a pretty successful career and life if I just stuck at it. My parents were proud that I had graduated from law school and was making my way in New York, and I didn't want to let anybody down. We all have second thoughts about the decisions we make, and that's why any kind of negativity is dangerous. It scratches at your own self-doubt and makes it itch.

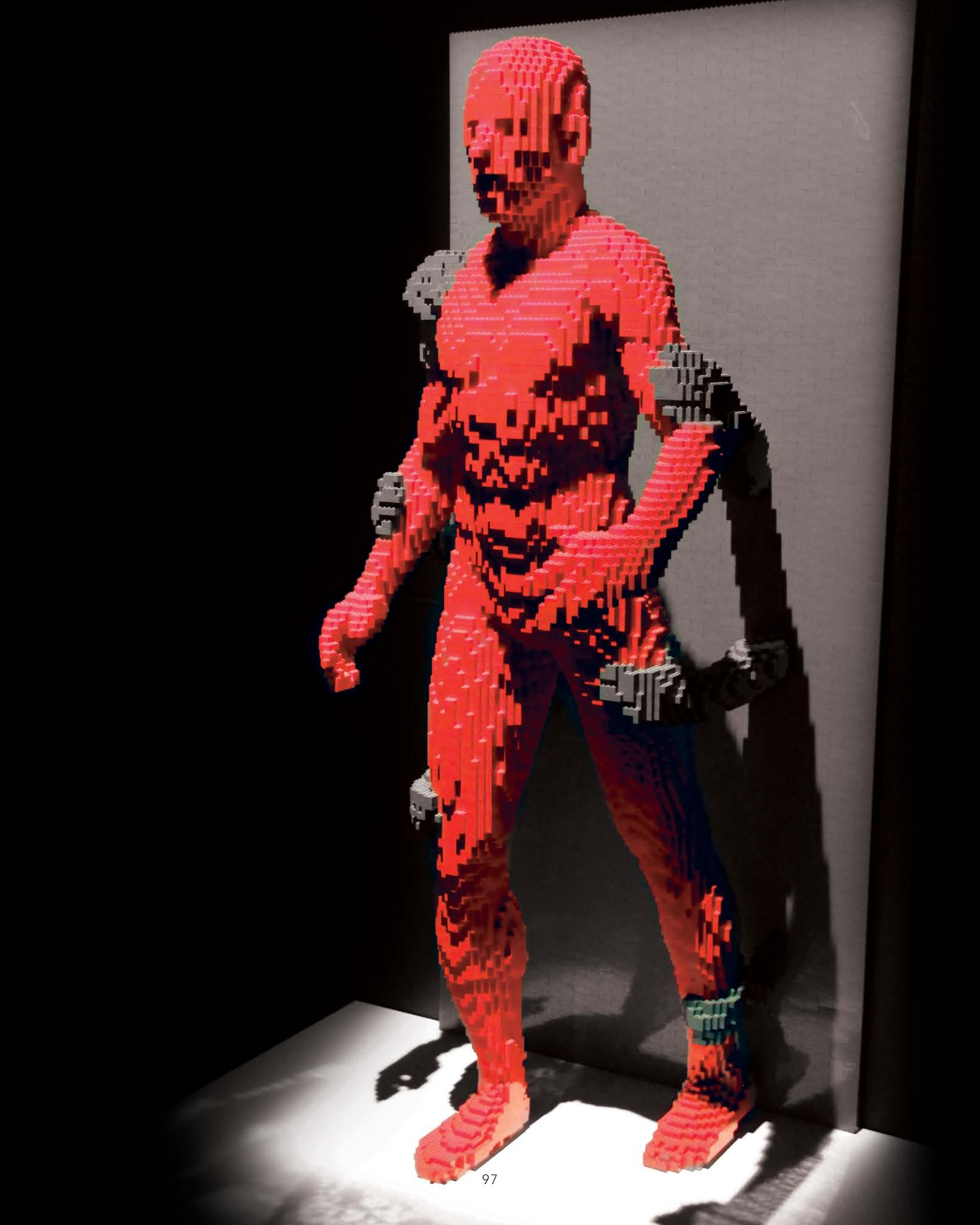
If you hear others say it often enough, you start to tell yourself that you can't do it. You don't need that. Life as an artist is insecure enough.

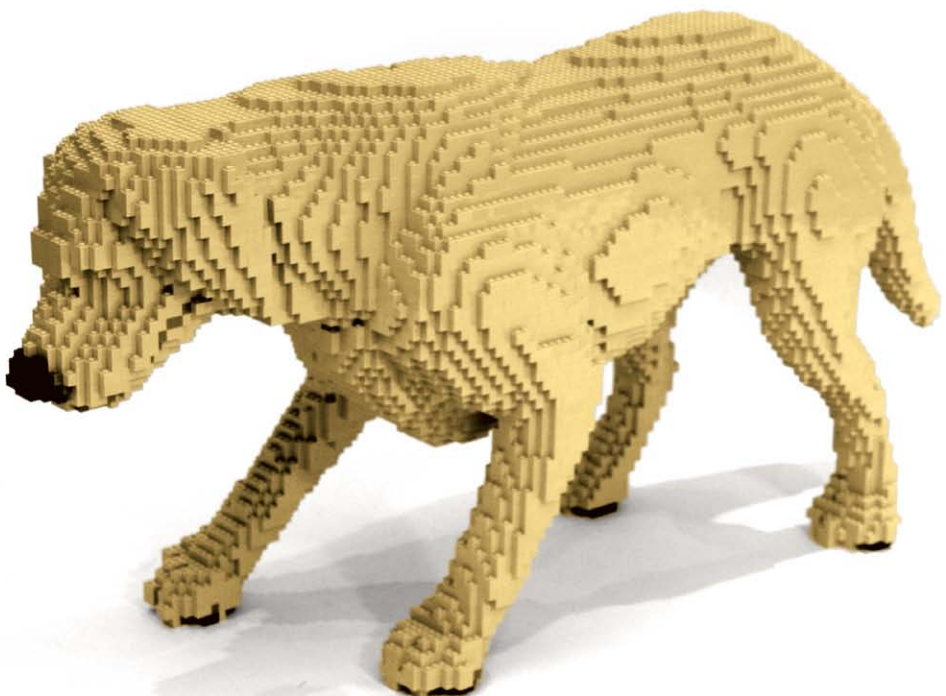
When people around me started chipping away at my convictions, I found myself at a crossroads. Do I listen to what they are saying, or do I keep faith in the leap I've made?

So while it was hard, I had to cut some people out of my life. It was a difficult time. But I don't think I could have gotten to where I am and done what I've done if I'd kept them in my life.

I made *Grasp* for them. *Grasp* is breaking away from that negativity—pulling away and escaping all of those things trying to hold you back.

When I quit practicing law, my parents picked up the slack, helping me pay some bills so I could follow my dream. They were an amazing support and never showed any doubts or disappointment. I wouldn't be where I am without that support.





LEGO WARS
DOG

Dogs do speak, but only to those who know how to listen.
—Orhan Pamuk

When I was a kid, my parents let me keep a 36-square-foot LEGO city in our living room. Maybe Mom and Dad thought it made for a good conversation piece, or perhaps they were just patient. It was behind the couch, so visitors didn't necessarily see it at first glance. But if you did peek behind the cushions, you'd have seen office buildings, roads, homes, airports, hospitals, military bases, cars, trucks, stuntmen, kids playing on the street, and other scenes of a vibrant miniature community. Sometimes my sister, Stephanie, who's three years younger than I am, would play with me in my city.

We lived outside the city limits of Veneta, and our nearest neighbor was over a mile away, so it wasn't like I could go knock on a friend's door very easily. Growing up, if I wanted to play with another kid, it had to be my sister.

Stephanie would give my LEGO figures names and backstories. I would be playing with this guy on a motorcycle and I'd say, "Hey, watch this jump," and she'd go, "Yeah, that's Dan. He's married to Susan, they've been living together for years, and they have this white house with the yellow roof." And I'd say, "Yeah, sure!" For me, Dan was just a crazy guy on a motorcycle; for Stephanie, he was a family man with so much to lose if the jump went wrong.

Now, the thing about this LEGO city behind the couch is that it wasn't just a city. It was also a highly organized military complex, from which I could arrange sorties and other campaigns against Stephanie's Barbie dollhouse, which she kept in her room.

I would create an army of LEGO figures and build aircraft and warships out of LEGO bricks to attack the Barbies. I couldn't just carry my army down the hallway to her bedroom; it had to have official transport. For whatever reason, I decided that the hall carpet was an ocean, so the army couldn't drive. Planes and battleships were the order of the day.

The army would sail forth over the carpet-ocean, then knock politely on the door. Stephanie would open the door, and I'd yell, "Attack!"

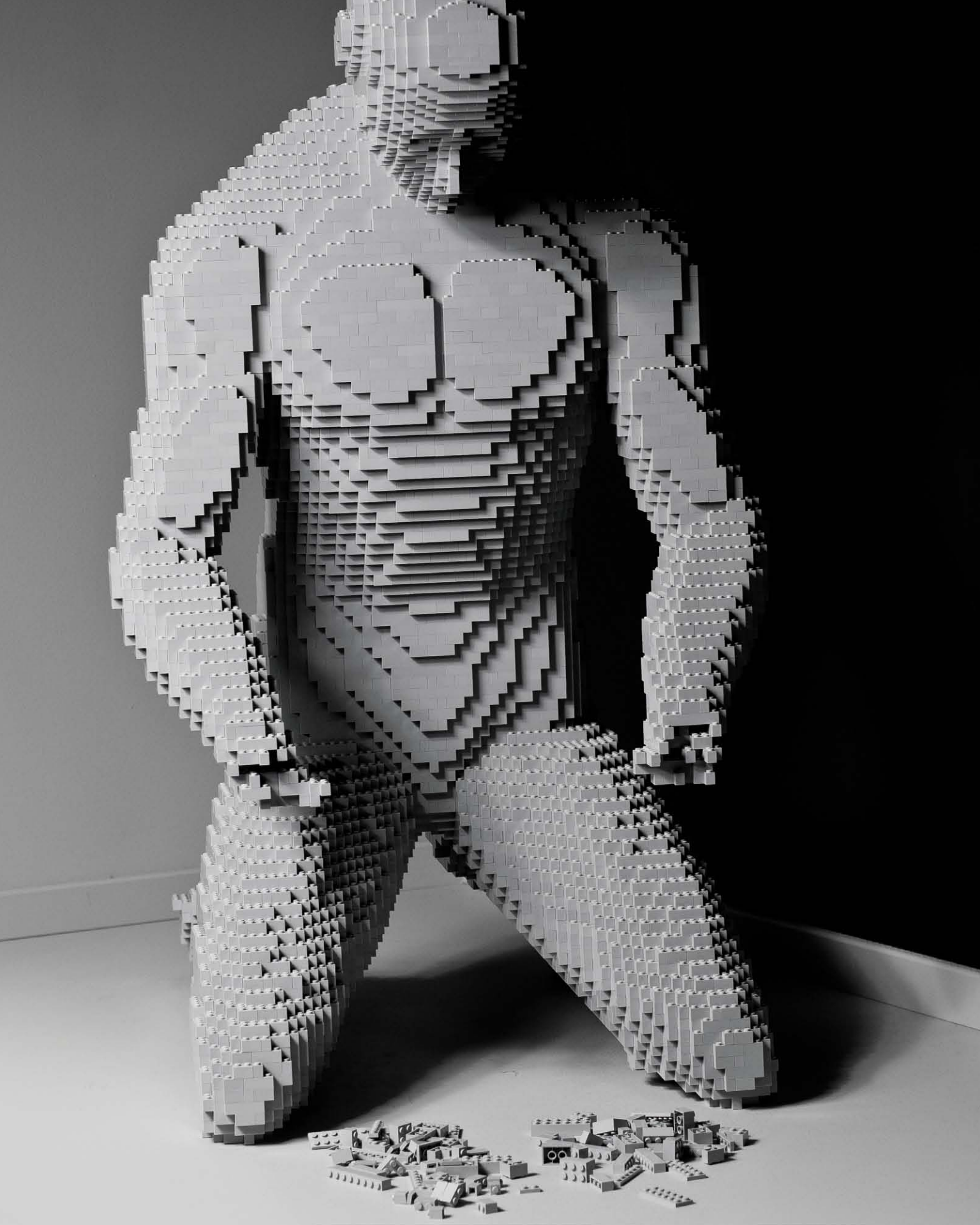
Of course, Barbie dolls are much taller and larger than your average LEGO figure. So I'd have to try to overwhelm them with numbers. It never worked; the Barbies always won.

At some point, I asked my parents, "Can I have a dog?" And they said, "No."

So I tore down my LEGO city and built a dog. It was very rectangular and boxy, so I called it a boxer. When it was finished, I had my first "aha" moment with LEGO creations. Building that dog showed me that this toy could be used for more than building cars and trucks and buildings. You can build all sorts of artwork with it—animals, people, even ideas.

Of course, that dog was long ago deconstructed to make a myriad of other things. But when I was sketching out ideas for the *In Pieces* collaboration with photographer Dean West, I had this desire to make another dog, a better dog. And I'm rather proud of this dog: the poise of his legs, the turn of his head. He tells a story within Dean's wonderful photograph.

And when I look at it, there's still the spirit of the dog made out of a city that waged a savage LEGO war against the Barbies in a home in the green Oregon forest.



THE FEAR OF FEAR HANDS

Worry is a misuse of the imagination.
—Dan Zadra

I'm a worrier. Whatever success I've had, I'm always thinking, can I sustain this? When's the other shoe going to drop? What if my work is just a fad, a kind of artistic pet rock that people find bright and shiny for a while before moving on to something else?

Hands came after my Lancaster, Pennsylvania, show, sometime in 2008. I'd never expected to have a solo show, and when Lancaster came up, I took it with both hands (so to speak!). I never really thought it would be successful; I was just this guy noodling around with LEGO bricks.

But Lancaster did go well, lots of people came, and suddenly art people—serious art people—became interested in what I was doing. I got invited to do another solo show, in Hollywood, Florida. And, of course, they said, "We want to see some new stuff, work that no one else has seen before."

So I went back into the studio, but I found that something had changed. There were expectations that never existed before. In my studio, alone, surrounded by all these buckets of bricks with a blank table in front of me, I suddenly found myself very afraid.

What if I can't think of anything to create?

What if the thing I create sucks?

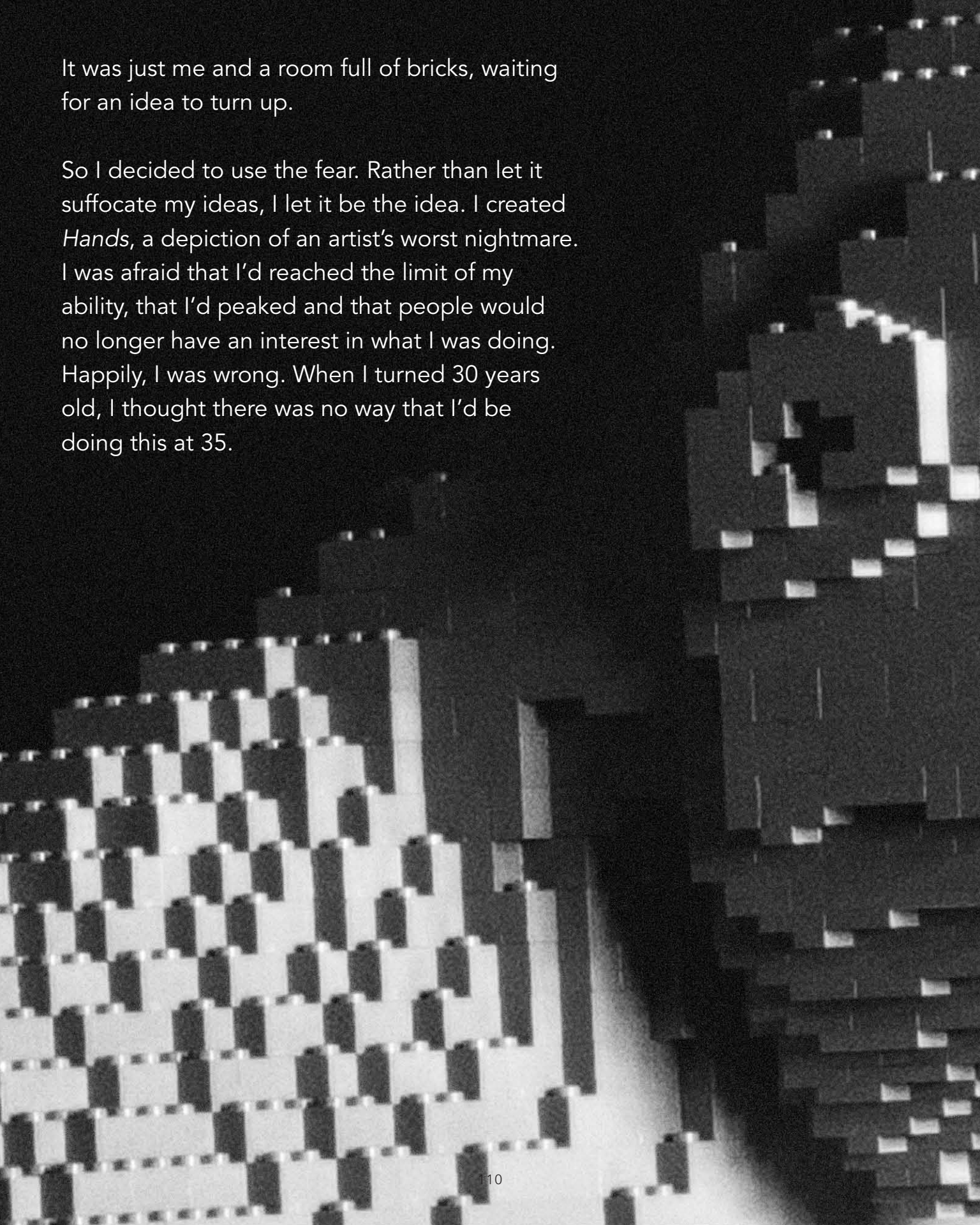
What if I create this show for Florida, and nobody comes, and the reviews are bad, and the gallery loses a ton of money?

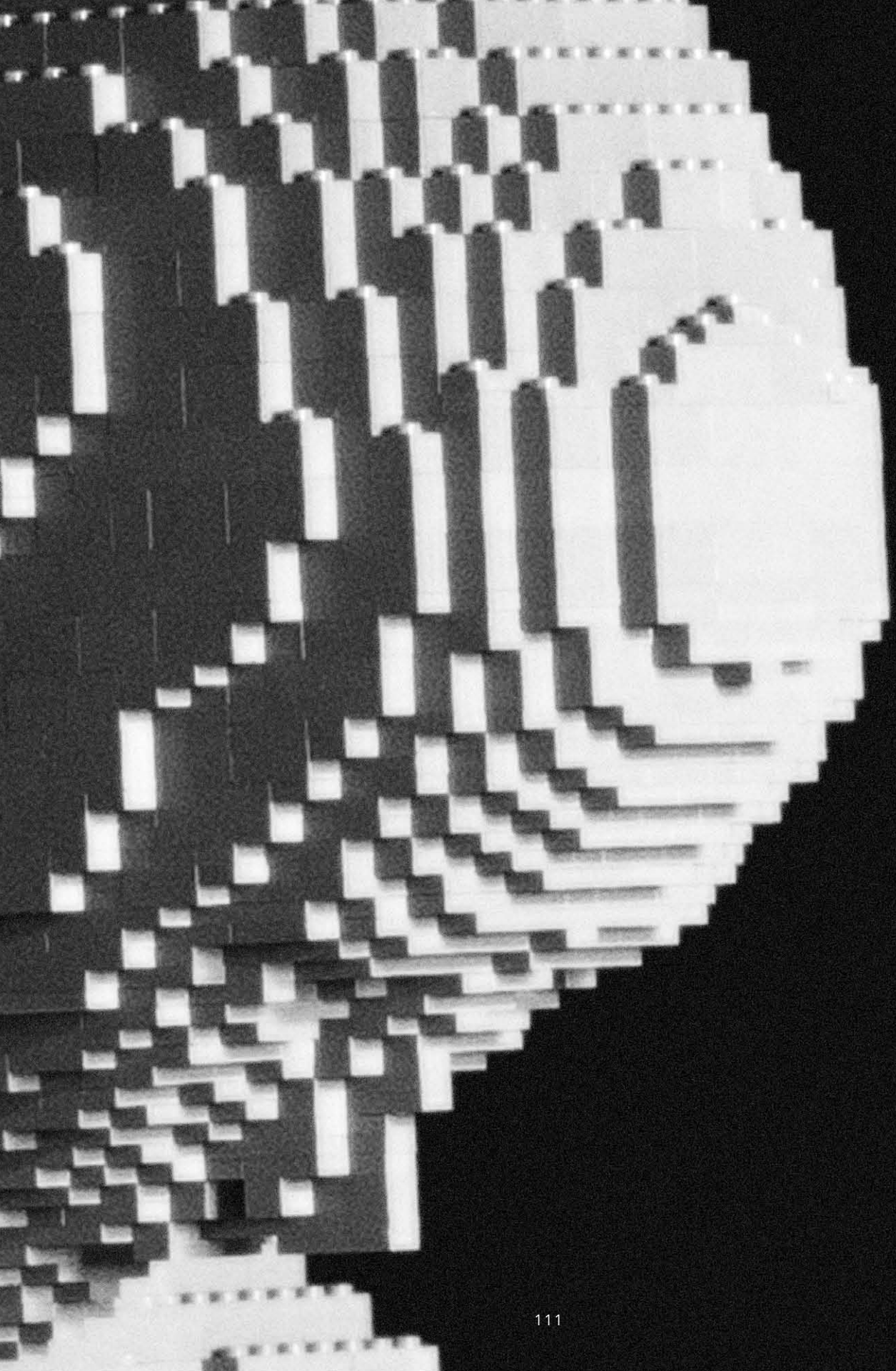
What if Lancaster was just a fluke, and really there is no talent in these hands after all?

In 2008, it wasn't too late for me to go back to being a lawyer. I still had my law degree, I was a member of the bar—I had the pieces of paper that told the world, "This guy's a lawyer." I didn't have a piece of paper that said, "Yes, you are an artist. Yes, you have the world's permission to do what you do."

It was just me and a room full of bricks, waiting for an idea to turn up.

So I decided to use the fear. Rather than let it suffocate my ideas, I let it be the idea. I created *Hands*, a depiction of an artist's worst nightmare. I was afraid that I'd reached the limit of my ability, that I'd peaked and that people would no longer have an interest in what I was doing. Happily, I was wrong. When I turned 30 years old, I thought there was no way that I'd be doing this at 35.





ARCHITECT DREAMS PARTHENON

A doctor can bury his mistakes, but an architect can only advise his clients to plant vines.
—Frank Lloyd Wright

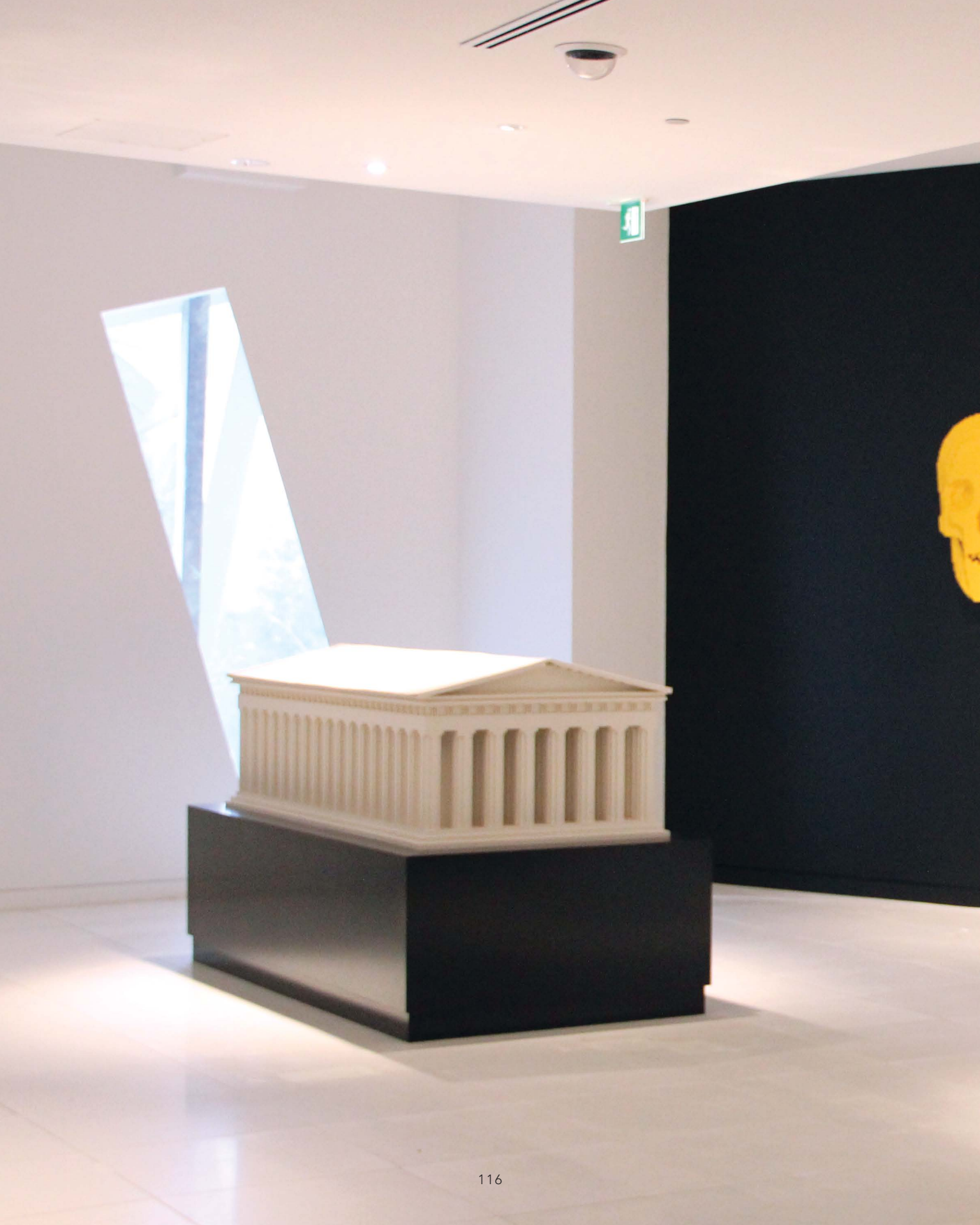
When I was a lawyer, I was one of several hundred at my firm, working mostly on mergers and acquisitions for huge companies like Microsoft, McDonald's, and Philip Morris. Our offices were in the MetLife Building on Park Avenue, right above Grand Central Station.

In a city known for the soaring elegance of the Empire State Building, the class of the Flatiron Building, and the historic Upper West Side brownstones, the MetLife Building is a square, uninspired slab of glass and concrete. It's depressing just to look at and is regularly voted as the building that most New Yorkers would like to see torn down. It's somehow tall and squat at the same time. Pan Am built it in the 1960s and went out of business a few decades later. Perhaps we'd best leave it at that.

Because it's on the same block as Grand Central Station, the building sits outside the grid. So instead of having its unsightliness tucked away into the city, it stands tall and stark, offending New Yorkers from just about every vantage point in Manhattan. And this was the place that I would go to and come home from, every day.

When I was younger, I thought I might like to be an architect. It made sense to me. My father was an engineer, so he was out there building bridges and things in the parks. And I had built my great LEGO city behind the sofa in the living room. I had a book, bound in deep purple, with all the classical Greek and Roman architecture, and I used to try to put some of the more famous buildings into my LEGO city.

When I was 10 or 11, I was on vacation with my mother's parents in Colorado, and I mentioned my architectural career aspirations. My grandfather took me to see an architect he knew. Our interview took place along a garden path.



"Why would you want to be an architect, boy? Why?" Whenever I asked a question or made an observation, he flew into a minor rage, repeating, "Why, boy, why?" It was almost as if he was offended that this skinny kid from Oregon had notions of joining his profession. By the time my grandfather collected me, I never wanted to speak to an architect for any reason ever again.

Fast-forward to New York City, and I'm coming home from the MetLife Building and pulling out my LEGO bricks, just creating things to unwind at the end of every day. And I remembered my old book with the black-and-white pictures of the ancient buildings of Athens and Rome. I remembered one picture in particular, of this building on the crest of the Acropolis. And I reckoned that I could build it myself without the help of any wild-eyed old architect from North Dakota.


"I'll catch you," he promised.
"There will be no harm."
And she wanted to go
And live in his arms.
But the boat seemed so safe.
And the jump seemed so big.
She could not just leave,
And abandon her rig.
"Finally," the prince said,
As he jumped on her boat.
"If you won't come to me,
Then I'll sail on the moat!"
And they sailed on her boat,
Just watching the palace.
But they could not go back,
'Cuz it was now owned by Alice.
The moral of the story,
If you must know:
If you stay where you are,
Then you may never go.
So if one would jump,
And prepare for the hassle,
One day they will find,
They can live in the castle.
by Nathan Sawaya

WALDO H. HUNT POP-UP-BOOK

I knew I'd found the magic key.
—Waldo H. Hunt, on pop-up books

There is something fascinating about the obituaries page. It's amazing to hear the life stories of remarkable people who somehow passed your notice while still living—people like Waldo H. Hunt, the "King of the Pop-Up Book."

I read about Mr. Hunt in the *Los Angeles Times* in late 2009. A former advertising man, he devoted the second half of his life to reviving the American pop-up book genre. He revolutionized the way pop-up books were written and produced. If you have a pop-up book at home today, you have Waldo H. Hunt to thank for it.

As a grown man making his living with art made out of a toy, I found something of a kindred spirit in the pages of that newspaper. So I decided to make a pop-up book of my own in tribute to Mr. Hunt, inscribed with a poem I'd written a few years before.

This is a poem
About a girl in a boat,
Who kept sailing around
The confines of a moat.

The moat went around
A very big palace
Inside lived a prince,
And his maid Alice.

The prince had no problems.
His life was pure pleasure.
But his love for that girl,
He could not measure.

And the girl loved him back.
Their love had been bound.
But she still sailed on her boat.
Around and around.

She didn't dare stop
For around the moat's edge
Were sharp jagged rocks
Where her boat could not wedge.

The prince watched her each day,
And watched her each night.
They'd talk all the time.
But it just wasn't right.

He begged her to jump.
And leave the boat far below.
But she kept sailing around,
Not ready to go.

"I'll catch you," he promised.
"There will be no harm."
And she wanted to go
And live in his arms.

But the boat seemed so safe.
And the jump seemed so big.
She could not just leave,
And abandon her rig.

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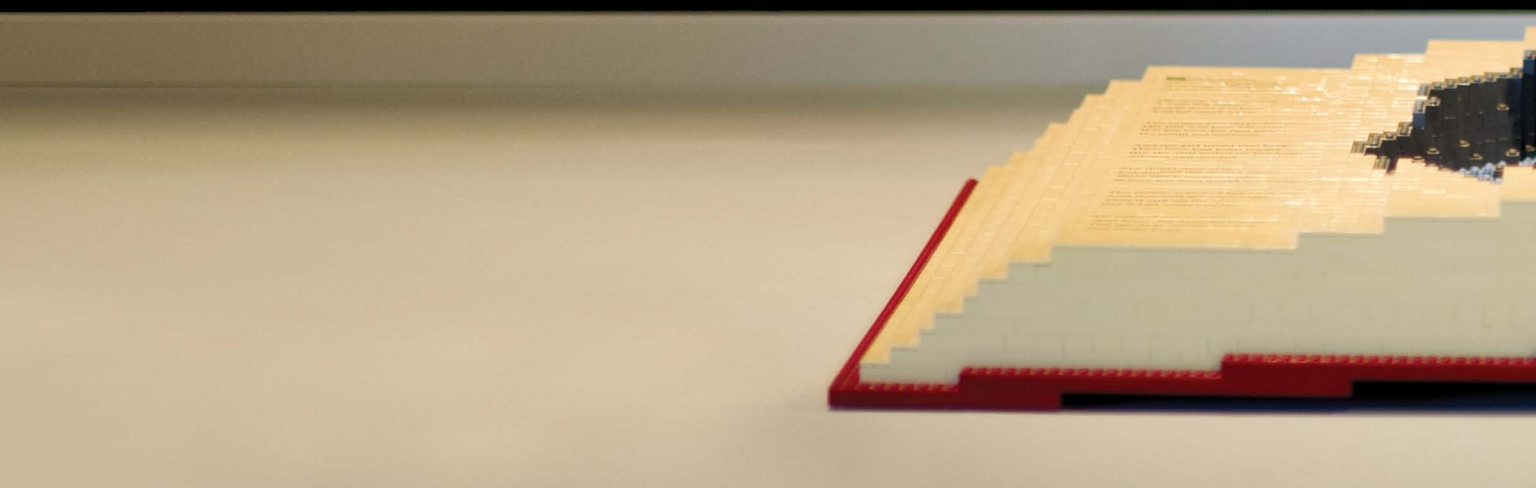


RUNNING WATER SWIMMER

Run when you can, walk if you have to, crawl if you must; just never give up. —Dean Karnazes

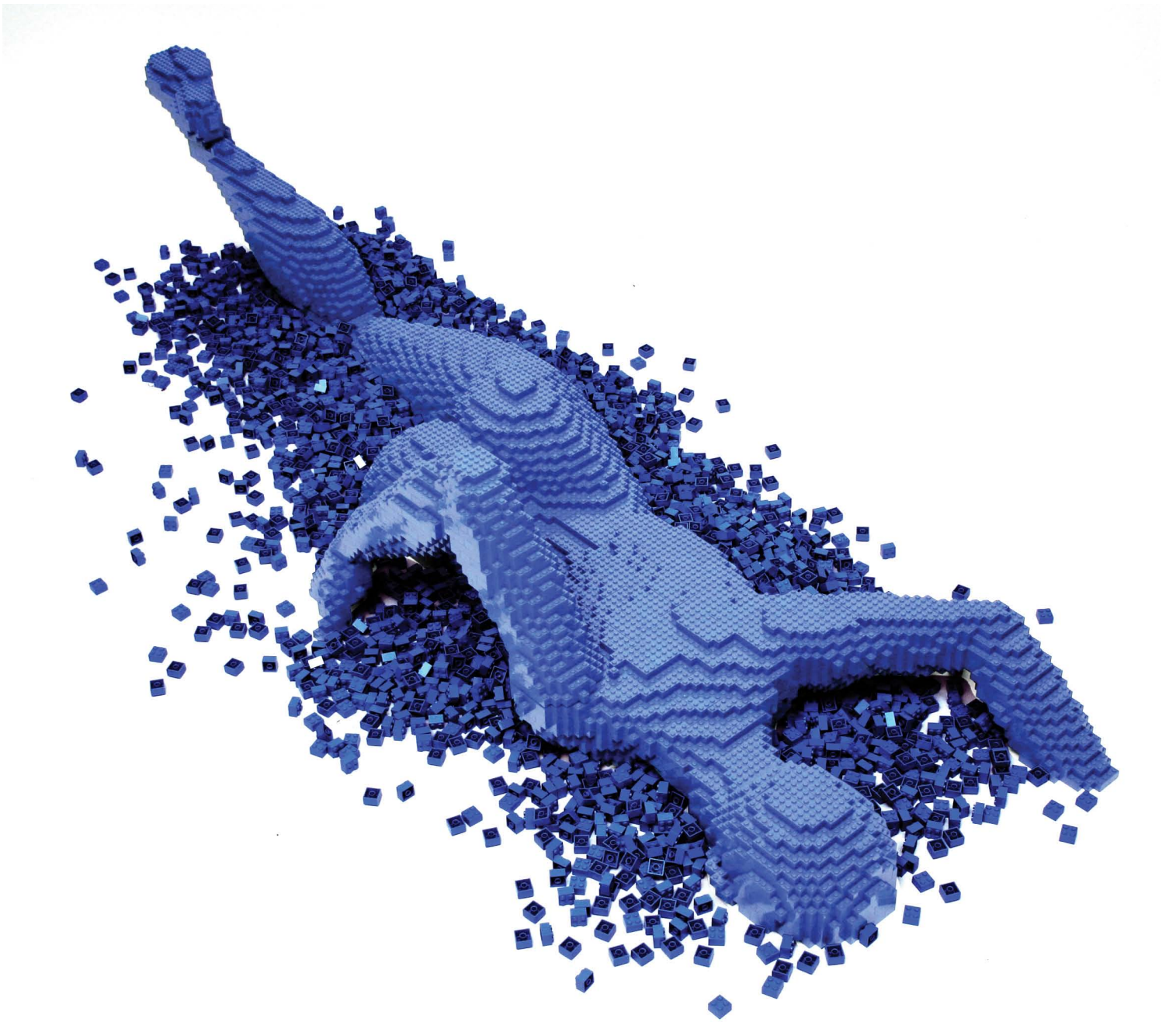
I come from a family of runners. My dad is a marathoner—still runs races at the age of 60-something and places really high for his age. My sister is a runner too. She even married a professional runner. It's in the family.

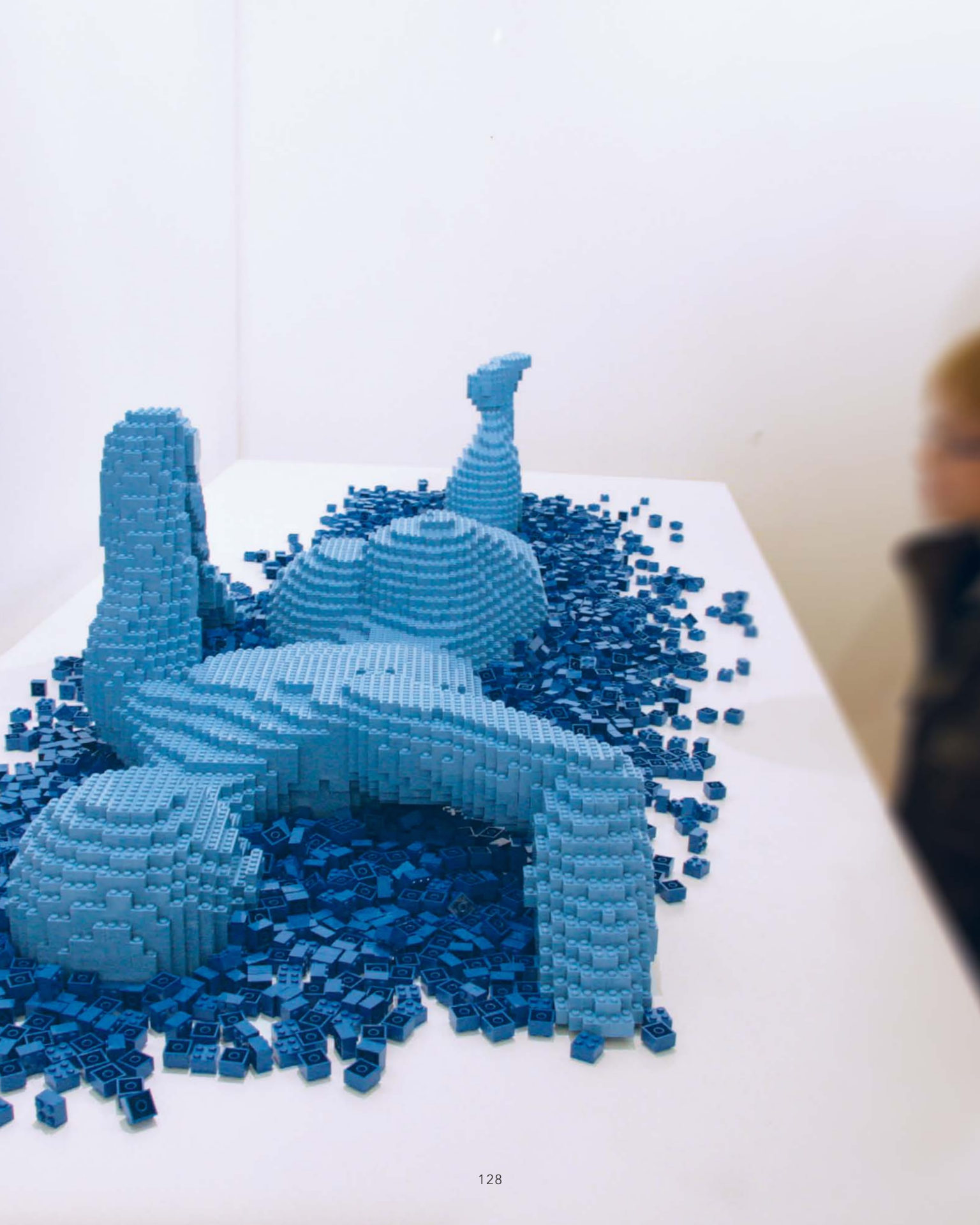
I grew up in Oregon, where running is a holy thing. Track is what you do. My hometown of Veneta is 30 minutes from the University of Oregon in Eugene, where Bill Bowerman coached, Steve Prefontaine ran, and Phil Knight started Nike. Eugene goes by the nickname of Tracktown, USA, and the university track, with massive grandstands on either side along the straights, looks more like an Olympic stadium than a college facility. This is where I had my track meets growing up.

Some places have ghosts. In New York, the Dakota building on the corner of 72nd Street and Central Park West is still thick with the presence of John Lennon, who used to live there. People come from all around the world, for all sorts of reasons, just to stand on that corner where he lived and died. They soak it up and talk to each other about what it all means. It's a pilgrimage.

In Eugene, Oregon, the ghost is Steve Prefontaine. "Pre" once held every American running record between 2,000 and 10,000 meters, was Nike's first endorsed track athlete, and died tragically in a car accident in 1975 at the age of 24. Running on that track and in that stadium was to be constantly reminded that Pre once ran there. Runners come from every corner of the globe just to sit in the stands. At the US Olympic track and field trials, often held in Eugene every four years, the best American athletes walk in the footsteps of thousands of more ordinary ones and leave running shirts, shoes, and medals at the place where Pre died. There's a big track meet every year, the Prefontaine Classic, and a running track through Eugene called Pre's Track.

Pre ran like a crazy man. He used to push himself, then push himself harder again—harder than anyone else. He used to say things like "Somebody may beat me, but they are going to have to bleed to do it." That's what's drummed into you as a track kid in Eugene, Oregon: to push yourself like Pre.





It was that thought that led me to *Swimmer*, another long-distance athlete. I started experimenting with *Swimmer* because I wanted to explore sculpting the female form. But this was right after my first show, and I was trying to work out how to do it in a way that was appropriate for a show a lot of kids would attend. So I had this idea of a figure, with her head down, who just swam and swam and swam. And kept swimming long after all the others had stopped.

Today *Swimmer* is one of my most popular pieces wherever it goes in the world—Singapore, Taipei, Australia, Europe, and the United States. People find different things to enjoy about it, see different things in it: swimming upstream, swimming against the tide, swimming with sharks. And that's something I could never have imagined all those years ago, lacing up my shoes on a haunted running track in Eugene.

RED SELF-PORTRAIT RED MASK

Nothing is more real than the masks we make to show each other who we are. —Christopher Barzak

When you work as an artist, you see the natural world around you differently. Things that you might not have noticed before or just took for granted, you start to see through the prism of your art. So if you're a painter and you see a tree or a bird or a sunrise, you think, *How could I paint that?* If you work in steel or marble, you think, *How could I sculpt that?* For me, it's all about bricks. If I see the curve in a tree, or a puffy white cloud, I think, *How could I do that with bricks?*

That's when you start to get into the artist's state of mind, that amazing, wonderful zone where time stands still and all that exists is you, your idea, and your medium.

That's why natural history museums have always resonated with me. You can find so much inspiration just by walking around. Weird, crazy ideas that you could never dream up, ideas that could come only from real life. And the American Museum of Natural History in New York is one of the best.

I was in the Hall of African Peoples, which has all these wonderful masks on the wall of different sizes, colors, and shapes. Masks that hid the faces of warriors, of medicine men, and of the dead as they moved into the afterlife. I looked at them and thought, *How could I make these out of LEGO bricks?*

And so I made *Red Mask*. The face is mine. Only a heck of a lot bigger.

SIMPLY BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN WHITE

I struggle to create the female form out of LEGO bricks. I want to push the edges of creativity, the human form, storytelling, and concepts of beauty. The result is this woman made out of white bricks. She is one of the first full female forms within my collection of artwork. The *Woman in White* is pensive and solemn. She loves, has lost love, and longs for love. Her story offsets her sensuality.

VICTOR'S WAR
IWO JIMA REPLICA

Of the men who fought on Iwo Jima, uncommon valor was a common virtue.
—Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz

One of the unexpected, wonderful, and often perplexing things about my journey as an artist is that I am asked to do commissions. I usually politely decline, but in 2006, I was honored to be asked to re-create Joe Rosenthal's famous picture for the opening of the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Quantico, Virginia. Like most Americans, I'd seen the picture countless times and had heard the story of Franklin Sousley, Harlon Block, Michael Strank, John Bradley, Rene Gagnon, and Ira Hayes, the six servicemen depicted. When I began the project, I was actually looking forward to immersing myself in that famous American moment on Mount Suribachi and learning a little more about it. What I wasn't expecting, however, was the personal memories that it would trigger.

My father's father, Victor Sawaya, owned and ran a pool hall in Minot, North Dakota, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He was driving when the news came over the radio, and he immediately decided to close his business and join the US Army. He served in the Pacific Theatre in places like Guam and Okinawa but, like many men of his generation, seldom spoke of it upon his return. My father grew up knowing that his father had served, but not a whole lot more. His guess was that Victor wanted to put the war behind him and devote his energies to raising his family in peacetime.

When I began working on Iwo Jima, I suddenly had this memory of my grandfather from when I was 10 or 11. At this point in time he was quite old and unwell. He couldn't look after himself anymore, and we'd had to move him out of his home and into a VA hospital. As we were clearing out some of his stuff in the house, my father and I found a box. Within this box was a series of smaller boxes containing Victor's military memorabilia. There were the sorts of things that you might expect: military medals, letters from home. Documents listed him as serving in the 259th Ordnance Company and being on the mailing list for the 74th Field Hospital. But the thing that really hit my father and I hard was a series of photographs from

Victor's time in the war. Some of them were of him, taken in various places by other people. But others were taken by him—graphic depictions of wartime. Some of them showed dead bodies; another showed skulls. The reality of war.

It was a harrowing discovery for a young boy to make, and I remember my father also being quite shocked. His father had never mentioned the existence of the box or its contents. Unfortunately, Victor was by then no longer in a state of mind for us to ask him about it. So we never knew much more than the faint outline of war that Vic's photographs drew for us. When I studied Rosenthal's picture, I couldn't help but think of my grandfather's box of lost memories and of all the photographs that the millions of other Americans who'd served had stashed away in attics and trunks, unseen and perhaps forgotten.

Of the six men who raised the flag on Iwo Jima, three (Sousley, Block, and Strank) never made it off the island, never made it home. PFC Sousley was killed by a sniper's bullet about a month after the photograph was taken. Corporal Block was killed by a mortar round three weeks before that. Sergeant Strank, who served in the same squad, died from a bullet wound the same day as Block. Those who survived returned home as heroes and celebrities, though all struggled with their time at war. Corporal Hayes's difficulties were immortalized in a ballad sung by Johnny Cash. Pharmacist's Mate Second Class Bradley reportedly barely spoke of his service, with his family learning of his Navy Cross citation only after his death. He only ever gave one recorded interview.

Bradley's reluctance reminded me of Victor, and it was my grandfather whom I thought of most as I was putting this piece together.

HEROES
HAWK

I consider skateboarding an art form, a lifestyle, and a sport.
—Tony Hawk

As an artist, I have my heroes. Some of them are also artists. I like the British artist Antony Gormley a lot. He did this amazing installation, *Event Horizon*, with life-size human figures standing on the edges of buildings in London, New York, and São Paulo. Wonderful.

I've carried a book on Tom Friedman's art around with me for decades. It's been on every coffee table of every apartment I've ever lived in. It shows his fantastic art made out of bubblegum and toothpicks and soap—whatever was around him. In a way, seeing what Friedman did gave me permission to take my own art seriously. Here was a guy making legitimate art, shown in legitimate museums, out of alternative media. So why couldn't I?

When I looked at that book, I'd begin to believe that it could all be possible.

Jim Lee, the comic-book artist and publisher, is another hero. He has an amazing bank of properties he can play with: Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman. Although he didn't create these characters, he has an incredibly fresh take on familiar icons.

But the guy I've tried to model my career on isn't an artist at all. At least not one you'd find in a museum. Tony Hawk and I first crossed paths when we were both featured in an article about people who had weird jobs. I was the LEGO guy; he was the skateboarder who landed the 900 and sold millions of video games. And then we crossed paths again at a Google Zeitgeist event, and we were on a small panel, so we got to spend some more time talking. He eventually commissioned *Hawk*.

Tony took something that wasn't a job and made it a career. Then he made it into an industry. He makes giant leaps. He's not afraid of falling short, or if he is, he does a damn good job of hiding it. I look at him to see what he's doing next and say, *Should I be doing that?* Because for me, he's proof that you can make yourself.

DRAWING HANDS BUILDING YELLOW

I don't grow up. In me is the small child of my early days.
—M.C. Escher

M.C. Escher was a strong influence on me as a kid. His optical illusions made me think in different ways. His iconic *Drawing Hands* is a circular act of "creation by art." It made me think, *If Escher's hands could draw themselves, could I create a sculpture that was building itself—or possibly even taking itself apart?*

My sculptures are created one brick at a time. What if we saw the sculpture, during the creation process, holding that one brick? The result is *Building Yellow*, a self-made man.

LETTERMAN BIFF

I cannot sing, dance, or act; what else would I be but a talk show host?—David Letterman

Back in 2005, David Letterman began bringing on a series of artists to the *Late Show* to create their own representations of Biff Henderson, Dave's stage manager and straight man. They had someone sculpt Biff out of ice, someone made Biff out of Post-it notes, and some poor guy even got Biff tattooed on his leg. Then they stumbled across this LEGO artist and asked, "Can you build Biff out of LEGO bricks?" And they wanted it to happen over the course of the hour-long show.

Now, *Letterman*'s not live, but it is live-to-tape in front of a studio audience. They don't give you extra time: an hour was an hour, no more. Most of

my sculptures take weeks or sometimes months, so the only thing I figured I could do in an hour was a mosaic portrait. So that's what we did. I was asked to arrive six hours early for rehearsal; they graciously sent a car. The show is famously filmed at the Ed Sullivan Theater on Broadway, so I came straight from home downtown. I'd been told to bring a few things that had already been built, so I brought a globe, a rabbit, and a few other sculptures built out of LEGO bricks. Some of them were quite large, because I thought "bigger" might work better on television.

I got out of the car at this very famous theater where The Beatles first performed in the United States, and all these people were lined up in the street trying to get tickets. As the tourists watched me alight, I wasn't exactly looking cool. I had these bulky boxes, which I dragged behind me as I tried to get in the side door . . . probably not the kind of celebrity spotting they were hoping for. I sweated and cursed and pulled my boxes inside until I found where I was supposed to be.

Rehearsal went fine, and then we launched into actually taping the show. This was one of the first times I was on TV, which helped me a lot. I didn't realize how nervous I should be. But I did have that thought when I stepped out on stage: "Wow. How am I here?"

Letterman had two other guests that night, Ricky Gervais and Rachael Ray. I hadn't met either before, and I didn't meet them that day either. I was kept in my dressing room, away from the real stars. They were just down the hall, and you could hear crowds of people in their dressing rooms having what sounded like a great time. I was just alone in my quiet room, hanging out.

After David's monologue, he brings me out as the first guest. Not because I have top billing, but because I need to build the whole length of the show. Right before the curtains open up, he's supposed to give a little introduction: "He's a LEGO artist; he's built this and that, and here he is—Nathan Sawaya!" But David Letterman cannot pronounce the name "Sawaya" to save his life. He stops the tape every time and says, "Nope, I gotta do that again, I gotta do that again." On the fourth take, he gets it right. So when you're watching the edited show and Dave finally says "Nathan Sawaya!", the crowd goes crazy. In the final cut, it seems like I'm the biggest star to ever hit the stage.

So I start building the portrait of Biff when Dave has this great idea. He says, "Nathan, can Biff help you?" Of course, I play along, "Yeah, for

sure, Dave!" and Biff comes over. He doesn't have a clue what he's doing and just starts adding bricks in whatever place. When Biff leaves to do his other parts of the show, I have to undo what he's done. But he continues to come back and "help" in this way throughout the show, which just means it takes me more time to get it right.

I was on stage for the entire show, so whenever a joke would fall flat, David throws to me: "How's it going over there, Nathan? How're you doin'?"

And then Rachael is done, and so Dave says, "Okay, we're about to wrap it up," and asks "How's it going, Nathan?" Just as he says that, I'm snapping in the final brick. *Biff* is finished.

The show ends. I'm pumped because I got it done, and people are coming up because they want to see the work. The band comes over because they want to see it too. The guitarist nudges me hard and says, "You should probably look up." So I look up and it's David looking straight at me, coming to thank me and say a few words, and for the first time it hits me: *I'm on* Letterman*! I'm on* Letterman*!*

TALK SHOW STEPHEN

They say the only people who tell the truth are drunkards and children. Guess which one I am.

—Stephen Colbert

The Colbert Report was different from the *Late Show*. They shipped the art themselves, the rehearsal went really smooth, and I just sat in the audience and watched Stephen Colbert go. He was so quick-witted that it made me nervous.

When I went back to my dressing room after rehearsal, I was sitting there, and he walked in alone and said, "Hey, I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm a fan of your stuff. But just so you know, my character Stephen Colbert, he thinks your art is kinda weird, he thinks you're kinda strange, he thinks art in general is kinda pointless. So good luck!"

But I thought that I held my own, despite Colbert spitting out his water when I told him how much people have paid for a single piece. In the end, I shared my own sculpture of Stephen with him, and he seemed to finally understand the real value of my work.

THE FLAMING C CONAN

When all else fails, there's always delusion.
—Conan O'Brien

Conan O'Brien has reached out to me twice to build statues of him. One was a simple promotion for the debut of his new show *Conan* on TBS. For that I didn't even meet with Conan; I worked off a still photo.

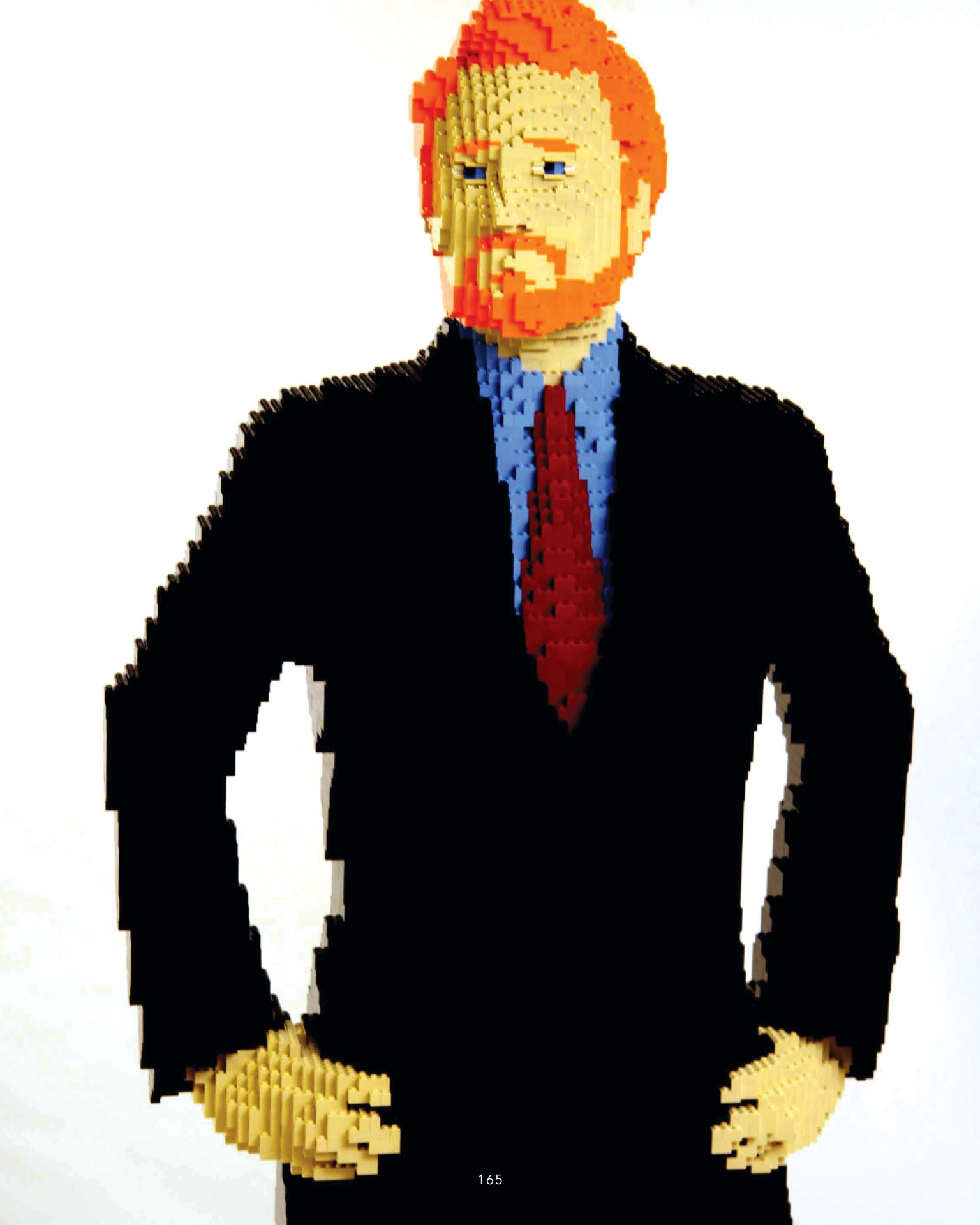
He reached out again after he had developed a character called The Flaming C with Warner Bros. animator Bruce Timm. Now, Bruce is just about as big a name as you will find in comic-book art, having been responsible for some of the best interpretations of Batman, Superman, Justice League, and the Green Lantern. But Conan's brief to Bruce was very . . . well, very Conan.

"I want a belt that has this thing for my BlackBerry on it . . . a stylized C, maybe with flames coming off it . . . and a Star of David behind it. Oven mitts, with some steam coming off the mitts . . . and maybe a jai alai glove on the other one. You know, I would like to be the first guy wearing shoes, like loafers, and socks. Like an old man's socks with garters. And fishnets."

Conan's Flaming C quickly gathered a life of its own and generated a whole lot of fan art. So Conan decided to exhibit the best of this fan art in a gallery during the 2011 Comic-Con in San Diego. They asked me to build a life-size sculpture of Bruce and Conan's creation out of LEGO bricks for the window of the gallery.

I got it finished and went down to San Diego for the opening, and Conan's there with his TV crew, walking through the gallery filming, and he comes up to me and says, "So I hear you did this."

Me: "Yeah, yeah, that's me."
Conan: "So how long did it take you?"
Me: "Ten days nonstop. I worked soooo hard on this . . . "



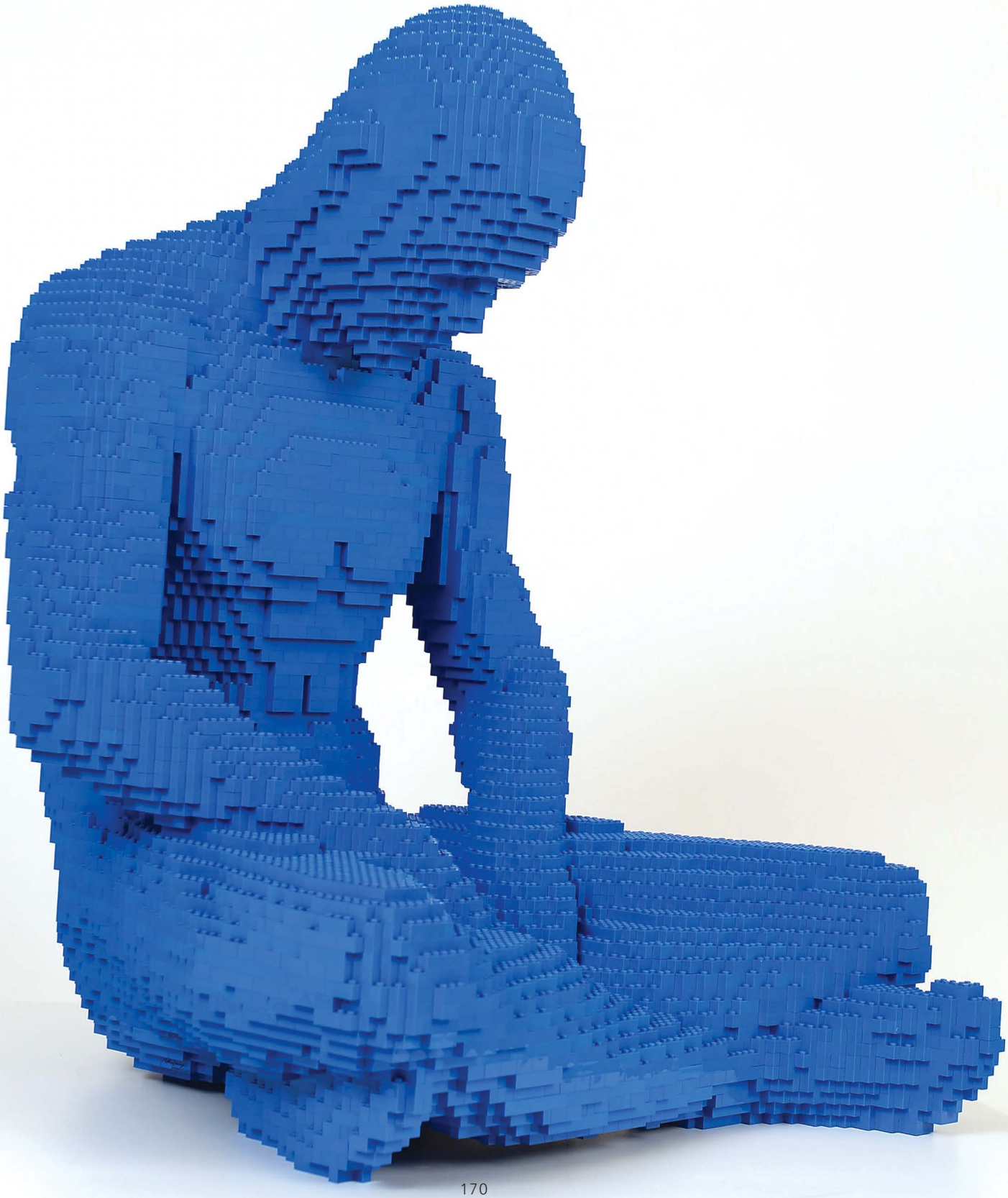
Conan: “Well, what’s the big deal? If you weren’t building this, you’d just be in your basement building Chewbacca.”

Everyone laughed, and that was my big Conan moment. But what a nice guy. After they had finished taping, he hung around, just chatting. He comes across in life just as he does on television, a super hero.

MOVING FORWARD
RED MAN CRAWLING

If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.
—Martin Luther King Jr.

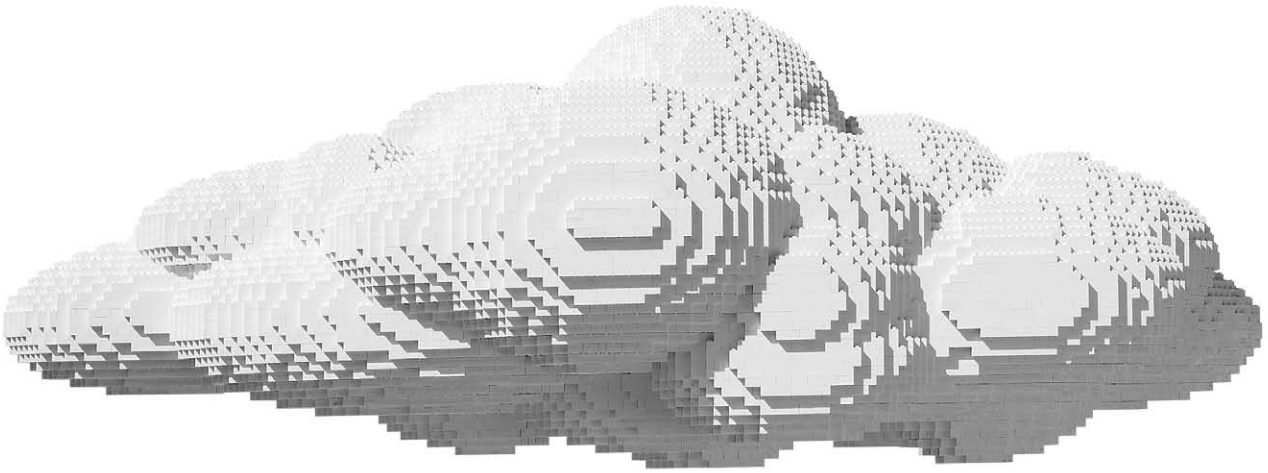
Crawling is first. We learn to crawl before everything else. The desire to get down on the floor and crawl is fleeting in adulthood. My childlike instincts sometimes urge me to get on the floor and crawl. Sometimes I am looking for a dropped brick. And when I'm down there, it feels very infant-like, like I'm a child with absolutely no cares in the world. Except that I am not that child. My childlike innocence is missing.



MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION

BLUE CROSS-LEGGED

It takes me days and days to create a sculpture. I have been told that I almost go into a trance while I am working. For the most part, I work alone in my studio. I sit, unmoving, for hours on end as I place brick after brick. One brick at a time. One brick on top of another. Brick by brick. It is my form of meditation. This figure comes from those moments of contemplating life, one brick at a time.



AMBOY SHOTGUN CLOUD

Clouds come floating into my life, no longer to carry rain or usher storm, but to add color to my sunset sky. —Rabindranath Tagore

My sometimes-collaborator Dean West is obsessed with clouds. For the most part, it's a nice obsession to have because it's very innocent. Clouds are beautiful; there's nothing nasty or dangerous about them. When we were out on the road making the *In Pieces* show, we were always having to pull over. Why? "Cloud. I've gotta get a photo of it." Dean just loves clouds. And when he sees a good-looking cloud, he takes a photo. He's got stocks and stocks of clouds that he can just drop into photos when he needs them.

It was in the Mojave Desert that Dean's cloud thing got us both into trouble. We'd been driving around, trying to find abandoned-looking buildings suitable for a particular shoot. In Twentynine Palms we'd talked to someone who said, "You should check out Amboy."

Amboy's not completely desolate: The 2000 census put the population at four, though it was difficult to see where they were living. There were no houses I could see, and the entire town, if you could call it that, consisted of a church (with no congregation), a school (with no students), a gas station (with extortionate prices), and what we thought was an abandoned motel. Amboy was something of a destination in the Route 66 heyday, but in the '70s, a new highway bypassed the town, and it fell into its current funk.

Apparently the town was purchased in 2007 by an eccentric gentleman, Albert Okura, who was going to rebuild and make it something, restore Amboy to its former glory. At the time we visited, Okura had reopened the gas station, but much of the rest of the town still lay in disrepair.

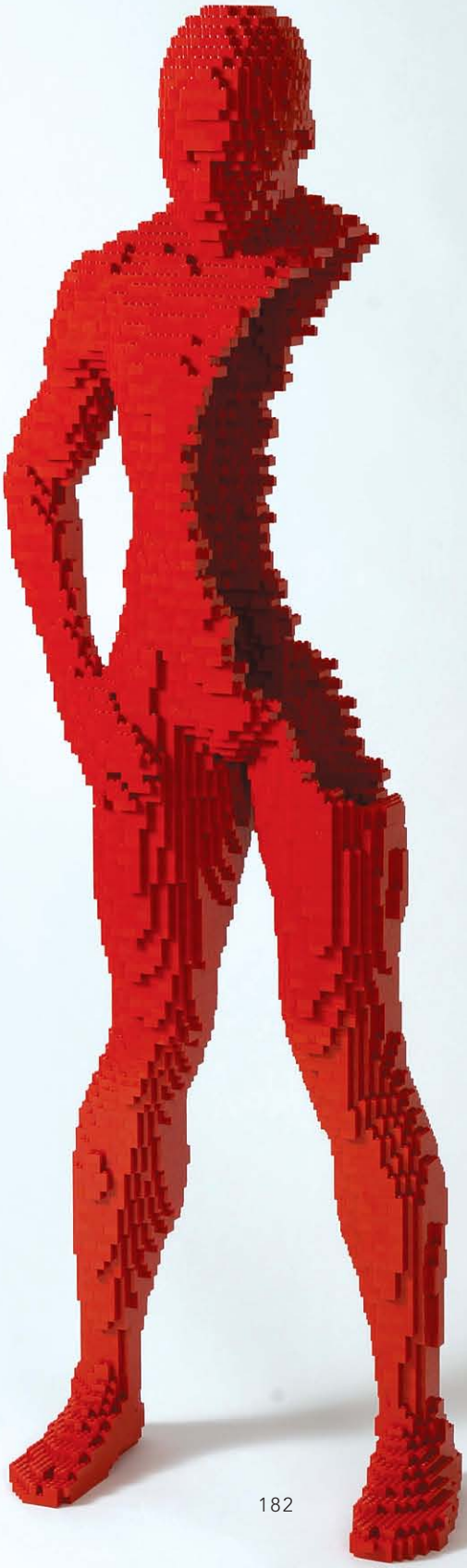

PETERSBURG

Nevertheless, Amboy had just what we were looking for: a desolate motel framed by mountains, with a nice little layer of made-to-order clouds on top. Nobody had stayed in the motel for years, and there were tired-looking weeds growing out of cracks everywhere. We looked around and couldn't find anybody; the office was long abandoned. So we figured we were okay to shoot photography.

We had no scaffolding or cranes or anything to get any elevation. But there was this gigantic tower, a radio tower that went maybe 100 feet in the air, that looked right over the motel. It had a ladder, so Dean grabbed his camera and started climbing. He was up so high, maybe 10 yards up in the sky, with one arm hooked around the ladder and the other holding his camera. But he couldn't hold on and get both his hands close enough to operate the camera. And that's when we had our little problem. We were yelling at each other. He shouted, "I can't get my arm out!" and I yelled back, "Well, why dontcha hold it like this . . . ?" like I knew what to do.

It was our yelling that brought out a gentleman with his dog and his gun. It seems he was living in a little trailer off to the side of the motel. I can't remember if he said he was the caretaker or what kind of official role he had, but he had some kind of claim to the motel. Most importantly, he didn't take kindly to the idea that we were photographing it. So we have this guy with this gun, waving it in the general direction of an untethered photographer 30 feet up a radio tower, and me on the ground, with nobody really qualified to deal with the situation. Eventually I convinced the man of our good intentions, Dean climbed down from the tower for a late introduction, and we got the pictures we needed.

When I was building the clouds, I had to experiment a lot. Anytime you try to build curves with bricks, it's a challenge. I was approaching them like a series of oval spheres coming together, but when they curve up, the bricks don't always connect properly. So the bottom of the cloud might look awesome, but the top of the cloud just isn't working. So you chip away, chisel away, and start the thing all over again. It just took awhile. Particularly when you're working with a guy who's obsessed with clouds, you've got to get it *just* right.



ART REFEREES INCOMPLETE

You don't notice the referee during the game unless he makes a bad call. —Drew Curtis

Incomplete was one in a series of pieces I made for a small exhibition in Florida toward the end of 2013. They were all explorations of the human form; there was one sitting cross-legged like a Buddha, and another on all fours with a great empty hole in his torso.

Before the show, I had a crazy few weeks; I was running behind schedule as usual. While I was working, the British graffiti artist Banksy came to New York and was conducting his self-appointed residency of the city, called *Better Out Than In*. I'd always liked the way Banksy brought his art to people in a completely different way, and especially the trail of flummoxed authorities and art commentators he left behind. Banksy unveiled a new event every day, including one in which he set up a small stall in Central Park and sold original pieces for $60 each.

One lucky (or insightful) customer bought a few and was no doubt delighted to discover that they were worth about $100,000 each. But it was the street art, the large-scale pieces painted on buildings and in alleys, that garnered the most attention. By the middle of the month, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg was so infuriated that he announced that any Banksy work discovered on city property would be destroyed. "You running up to somebody's property and defacing it is not my definition of art," Bloomberg said.

That set me off. My philosophy is that there are no rules to art. And I really, really hate it when people say, "This is art and that is not art." It's the most tired conversation of all time.

What is art? I base my opinion on intention: if you want it to be, it is. I've had years of people telling me that what I do is not art. Or that the way I do it is not art. People even tell me the fact that I'm gluing bricks is breaking a rule, because LEGO bricks are supposed to hold together with friction alone; if you glue it together, that's cheating. How can it be cheating? There are no referees in art.

At my exhibitions, I have an area where kids can build with bricks: who's to say that what *they* are doing is not art?

A lot of reporters ask: how does your art fit into contemporary art? And I can't answer. If you really think it's a question that needs an answer, ask an art critic or an art student, not a working artist.

When I started, I had a very narrow view of what the art world looked like. It wasn't very accurate. My goal was simply to get my art sold in contemporary galleries. I naively believed that the high point of art was to put it in a small room in Chelsea where two or three people would walk through every day. If Banksy's New York residency is art for everybody, then surely the gallery system is art for the few.

I like to think I've learned a little bit since then. And I try to worry less about people telling me that what I do isn't art. I'm particularly proud of the museum shows we do around the world where people can come and have a great experience for the price of a movie ticket. For a lot of them, it's the only art show they see all year.

These were the sorts of things that were swirling inside my head while I was building *Incomplete*. I loved the way Banksy kept pushing his own work further and further, to the point where he had a whole city chasing after him. And that was an indicator to me that my own journey as an artist, and a human being, remained unfinished. I had, and have, a lot more to do.

STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER

JOHN LENNON TRIBUTE

Time you enjoy wasting was not wasted.
—John Lennon

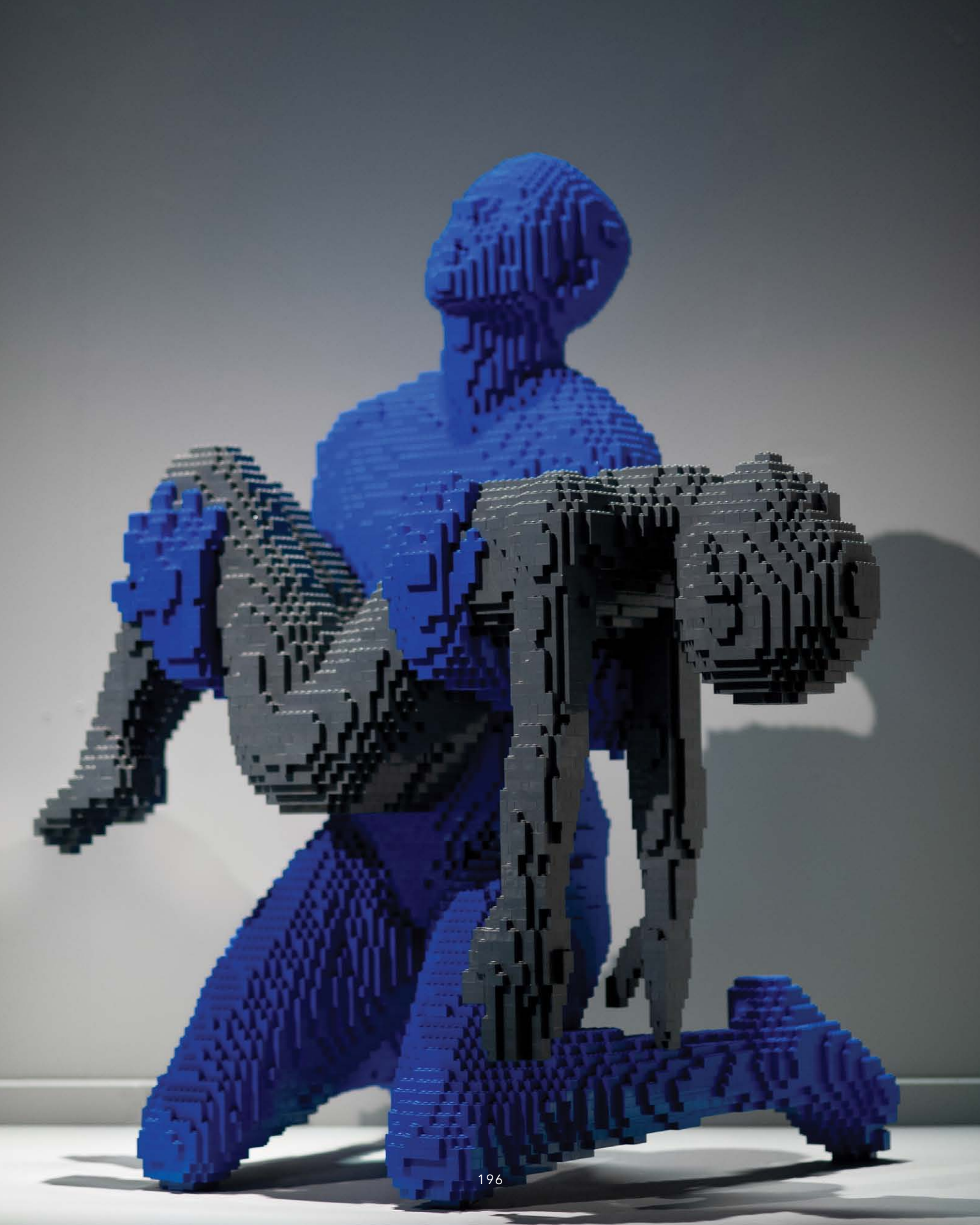
For the first few years after moving to New York, I would go to the gatherings at Strawberry Fields in Central Park on the anniversary of John Lennon's death on December 8. Strawberry Fields is a landscaped area with a memorial mosaic right across Central Park West from the Dakota building, where John lived and was murdered in 1980. I'm not sure why I was so drawn to it. Like tens of millions of people before and since, I "discovered" The Beatles at the age of 16, roughly 20 years after the band had broken up.

I was never a fanatic, but I still found Strawberry Fields profoundly moving, especially the first time I went.

Let me set the scene. You're in Central Park in the most famous city in the world, surrounded by trees, the buildings and Christmas lights twinkling in the background. All around you are strangers, many of whom, like you, are a long way from home. It's winter, so it's dark and cold and you should really be indoors getting warm. Instead, you're out under the sky, heavens above you, singing songs that you all learned in different places and that mean something different to each person singing. There is an amazing universality to the gathering, something reassuringly and unbreakably human about it. There is hope, too, as if by coming together and singing, you can bring John a little closer. Years later, when I was starting to make a name for myself as an artist, I found myself thinking about him and the impact of his art a lot more.

I took the self-portrait he'd done in 1968, which ended up on the cover of "Imagine," and did this very simple piece. I played around with the color and made it a shadow work to give the flat drawing some depth. I then suspended the pieces on near-invisible strings to give the illusion that John's face is floating. I felt this made John more reachable, a little bit like the nights in Strawberry Fields did. You can actually put your arm through his portrait, and almost figuratively pass through John.

By coincidence, after I made this piece, I happened to be sitting across a hotel breakfast table from writer David Sheff. David used to work for *Playboy* in its pomp and was the last person to interview John before he died. David got some unique access to John and was still close to Yoko Ono. I was talking to someone about my LEGO art, and David was considering writing a book about LEGO building at the time, so he introduced himself and we started talking. I told him about the Lennon piece, and he asked for a picture of it and if he could send it to Yoko. So here I was, this young budding artist, and my art is being shown to Yoko Ono. She emailed me and said it was really beautiful. It was so encouraging, so mind-blowing, first, that she had even seen it, and second, that she would take the time to respond to it. If ever I'm feeling down, I can still go to Strawberry Fields, stand there, take a look around, and then return home with a spring in my step.



CONNECTIONS
MY BOY

Art is not what you see, but what you make others see. —Edgar Degas

For a long time I didn't like to answer questions about *My Boy*, because the reactions to it were so strong, and its inspirations seem so prosaic in retrospect. I was simply inspired by a novel I was reading.

The way this work affects people is powerful, and the response actually scared me the first few times it was on exhibit. More so than with perhaps any other piece, people stop and stare. On several occasions I have seen people crying in front of it at the show.

On rare occasions, I've had moms and dads who lost a child reach out to me by letter or email to request a commission of a headstone or coffin. I've always declined these requests; it just doesn't feel right.

I don't have a son myself, though I did have a big impact on Will, Courtney's son, from a young age. I imagined someone's loss while creating this piece, but it's simply that: imagined.

When I first showed this piece, these reactions made me uncomfortable. After some time and reflection, I've made my peace with it. I believe that maybe what *My Boy* does is help people reconnect in some way, to remember.


Toys

BOTTLE CAPS TOYS FOR TOTS

After I'd become a full-time artist but still wasn't making quite enough to pay the bills, I got a call from Coca-Cola, who asked if I would create art for them out of bottle caps. One was a big portrait of their polar bear. It was giant: six feet tall and a couple of yards across. When they hung it up in the Coca-Cola museum, it replaced the Andy Warhol Coca-Cola art. I smiled at that: a Sawaya replacing a Warhol. That one was straightforward enough and came out great.

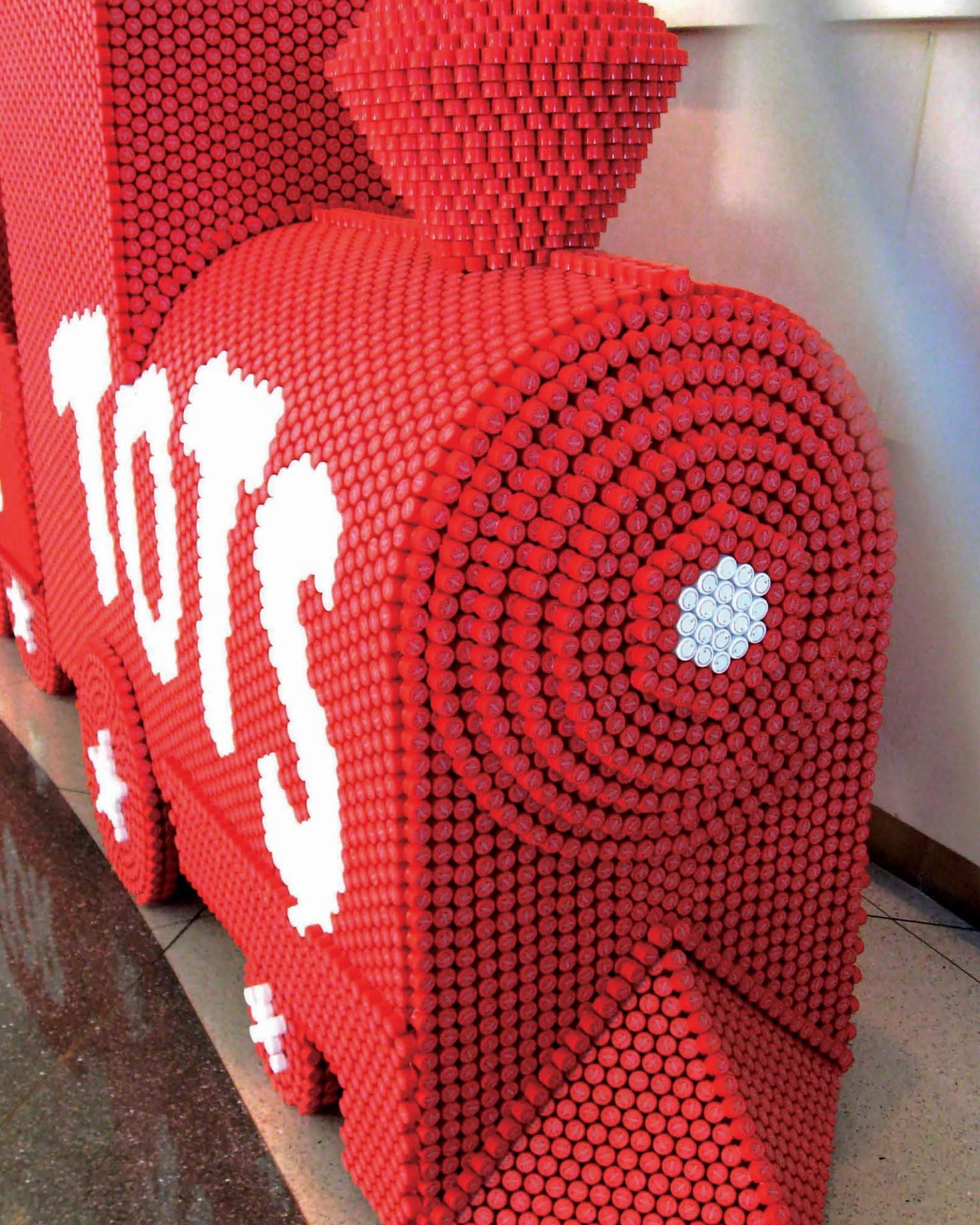
Coca-Cola's other request was a gigantic, 30-foot-long train made from bottle caps. It was for Toys for Tots, an organization run by the US Marine Corps Reserve that collects and distributes toys for the underprivileged at Christmas. Coca-Cola was a supporter of Toys for Tots and wanted to open the program at a holiday event at the Coca-Cola museum in Atlanta.

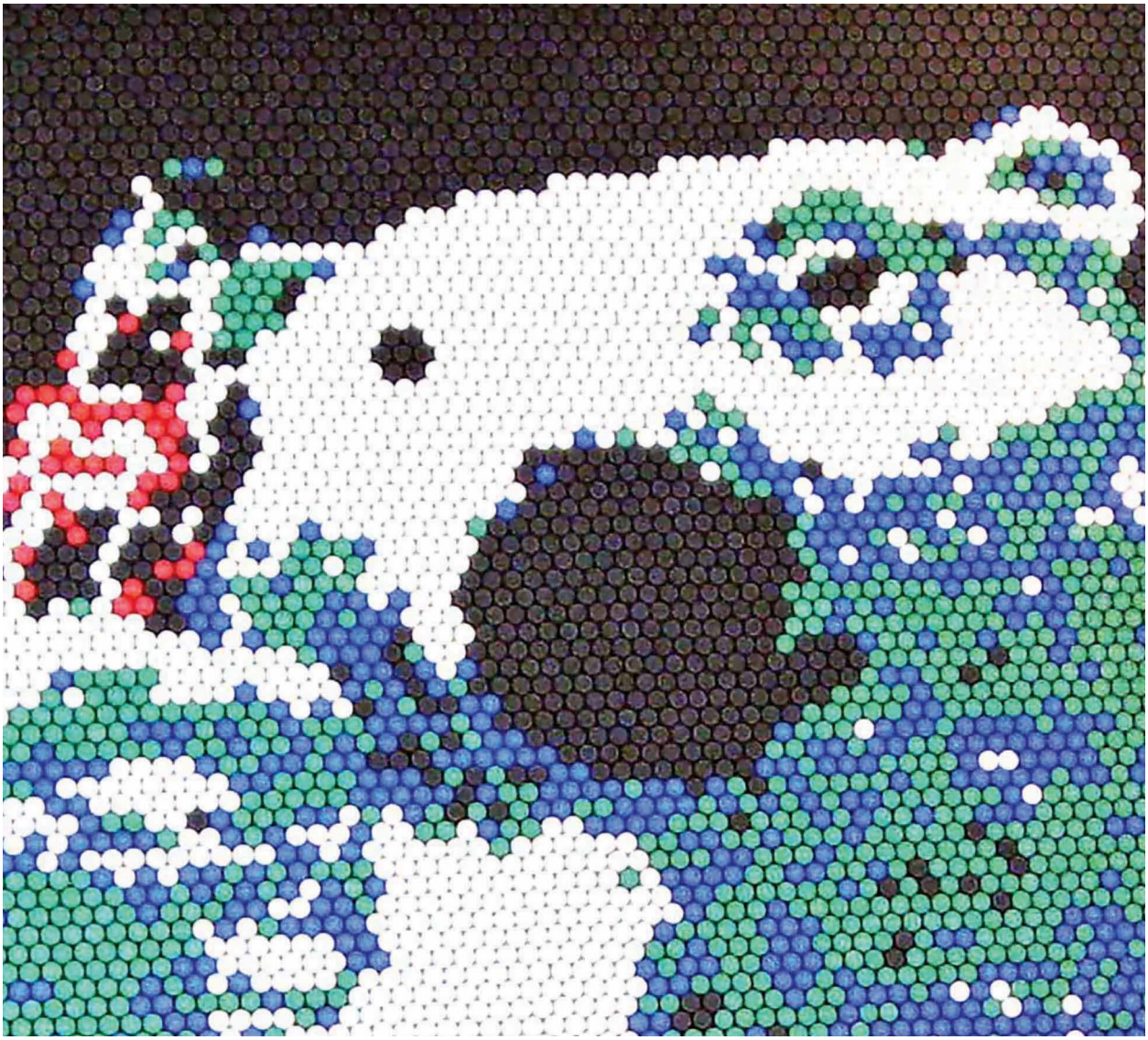
The train was for a great cause, but I went through a special kind of hell to make it. To begin with, I was living in New York City,

in an apartment where I could make LEGO sculptures. But a 30-foot train? There was no way I was going to pull that off in New York, so where would I go? As luck would have it, my aunt and uncle had just bought a farm in Decorah, Iowa, in the middle of the country, and they had a gigantic barn. Coca-Cola wanted this train there before Thanksgiving, so I spent a month over October and November in a freezing Iowa barn with 100,000 bottle caps.

Before building, I did all this math and science, trying to figure out all the surface areas, all the angles. I thought I did a pretty thorough job. For the project, however, Coke supplied all the bottle caps, unused and brand-new. Which was fine, but I hadn't considered one thing: When a bottle cap comes from the factory, it still has that little ring attached, the one you break off when you open the cap. So that adds 2 or 3 millimeters to every bottle cap. And with over 44,000 bottle caps, which is how many I ended up using, that's a big difference. So there was a lot of adjusting going on among the mice and chickens in that large, cold Iowa barn.

When I was finished with the train, I had to go back to New York. So I left it in my uncle's barn; Coca-Cola's event agency was going to send someone to pick it up. I explained to Coke's people that it's a piece of art, it's made of bottle





caps, and they had to be careful. Naturally, they said, yeah, yeah, we've got professionals; no problem. But they ended up hiring a couple of local guys who were more used to moving farm equipment. My aunt called at one point and said, "Well, the guys are here, but Uncle Fred's really concerned; they're handling the train really rough."

I got to Atlanta the night before the opening, and I hadn't even opened the crate yet. I unpacked it, and when I saw the wreckage I thought, *Oh my God*. One of the cars had collapsed in on itself. I spent six hours that night trying to fix it, repairing all these bottle caps that had broken off. There was a little pressure because the president of Coke and all these Coca-Cola executives and media were coming. But I got it done, and then happily went back to my LEGO bricks in my warm apartment in New York.

PRESIDENTS RUSHMORE

This memorial will crown the height of land between the Rocky Mountains and the Atlantic Seaboard, where coming generations may view it for all time.
—President Calvin Coolidge, at the opening of work on Mount Rushmore

It's possible that I have spent more time in the Mount Rushmore gift shop than any American artist alive. When my mother's father, Jack, retired from his career as a television newsman in the late 1970s, he and my grandmother moved into a log cabin in the Black Hills of South Dakota, almost at the feet of presidents Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln.

Theirs was a real log cabin, the Abraham Lincoln kind with the logs stacked on top of one another. It was a modest cabin on the edge of a pine forest, and it overlooked a lake, like something right out of a postcard. I stayed in a loft upstairs

that you could get to only by climbing a ladder. There wasn't a lot of headroom in the loft—you couldn't stand up there—but when you're eight years old, it's plenty of space.

My grandparents were members of the National Memorial, meaning that they could go and look at the presidents whenever they liked. You could catch a glimpse of Washington from the highway for free, but if you wanted to see the other three, you had to do as all the other good citizens did and pay your park fees. My grandparents' pass also meant that whenever we visited them, which was often, we would go too.

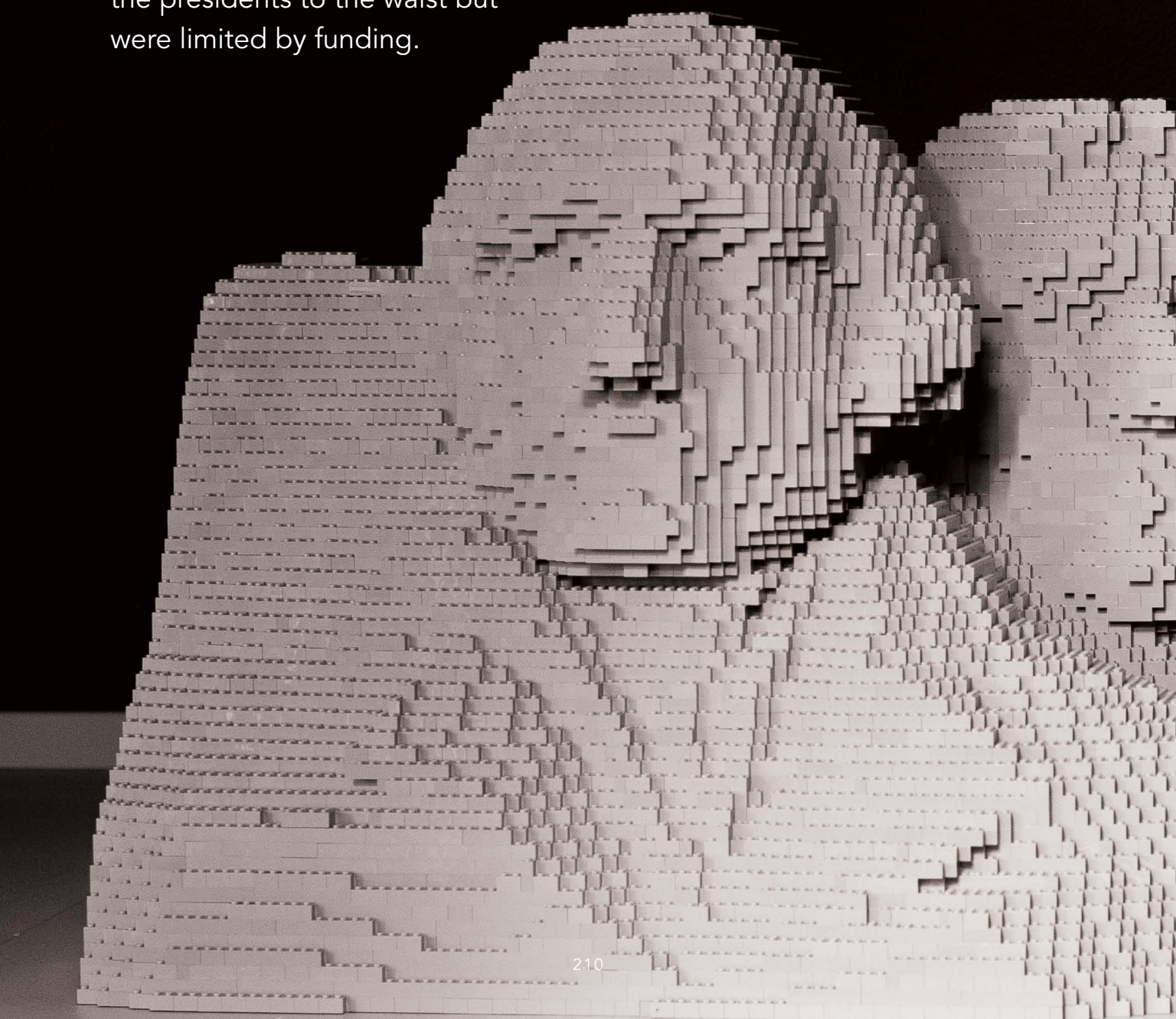
I must have seen Mount Rushmore dozens of times. I don't know why my parents also felt the need to keep going back, but they did, and we went with them often. We would go and admire it (who knew that one day I would be a sculptor?), and I have a lot of photos of it, from every conceivable angle. The authorities were also pretty innovative when it came to finding new ways for visitors to experience Mount Rushmore. They had fireworks, laser shows, brunches, and midnight concerts. And I experienced them all, at least once.

The thing that you first notice about Mount Rushmore is that it's not as big as you thought it would be. It's enormous, of course; each face is

60 feet high. But the surrounding mountains have a tendency to dwarf anything created by man.

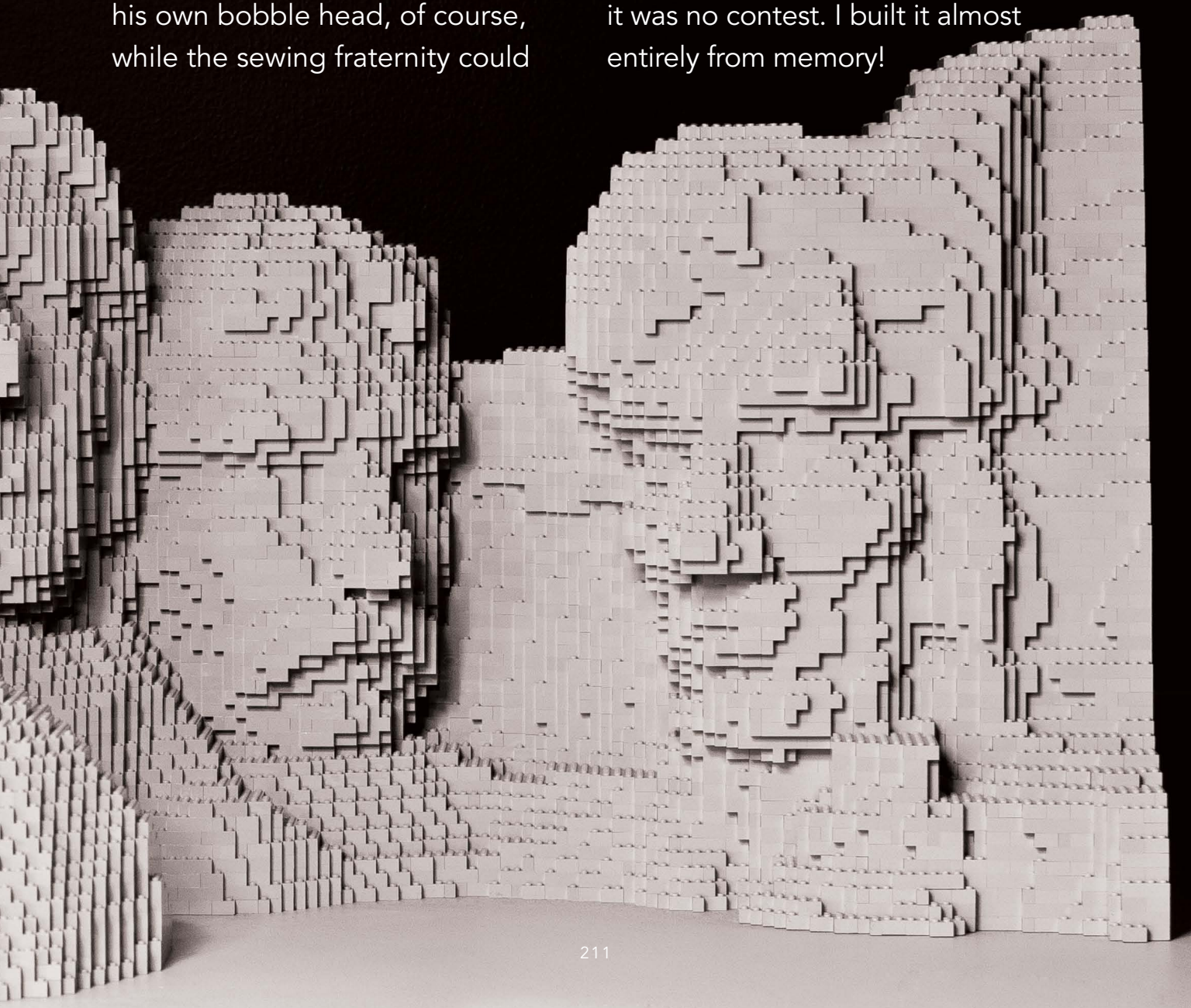
Perhaps that's simply a matter of the original plan. The father-and-son sculpting team of Gutzon and Lincoln Borglum intended to depict the presidents to the waist but were limited by funding.

The other thing you notice about Mount Rushmore while visiting is the number of tchotchkes you can put Mount Rushmore on. I was often left to wander the gift shop alone as my parents and grandparents indulged their passion for looking at the presidents, and I was fascinated.



I mean, it was more than the usual tea towels and magnets. You can get several kinds of baseballs with Mount Rushmore on them. A shot glass with the presidents that glows happily in the dark. A sipper cup big enough for a supersized soda, or travel mugs that keep your coffee warm in the car. Each president had his own bobble head, of course, while the sewing fraternity could protect its thumbs with a Mount Rushmore pewter thimble.

Years later, I ran a competition on my blog called "What Should Nathan Make?" The most popular entry after all the voting was a "famous landmark." And when it came to choosing the landmark, it was no contest. I built it almost entirely from memory!



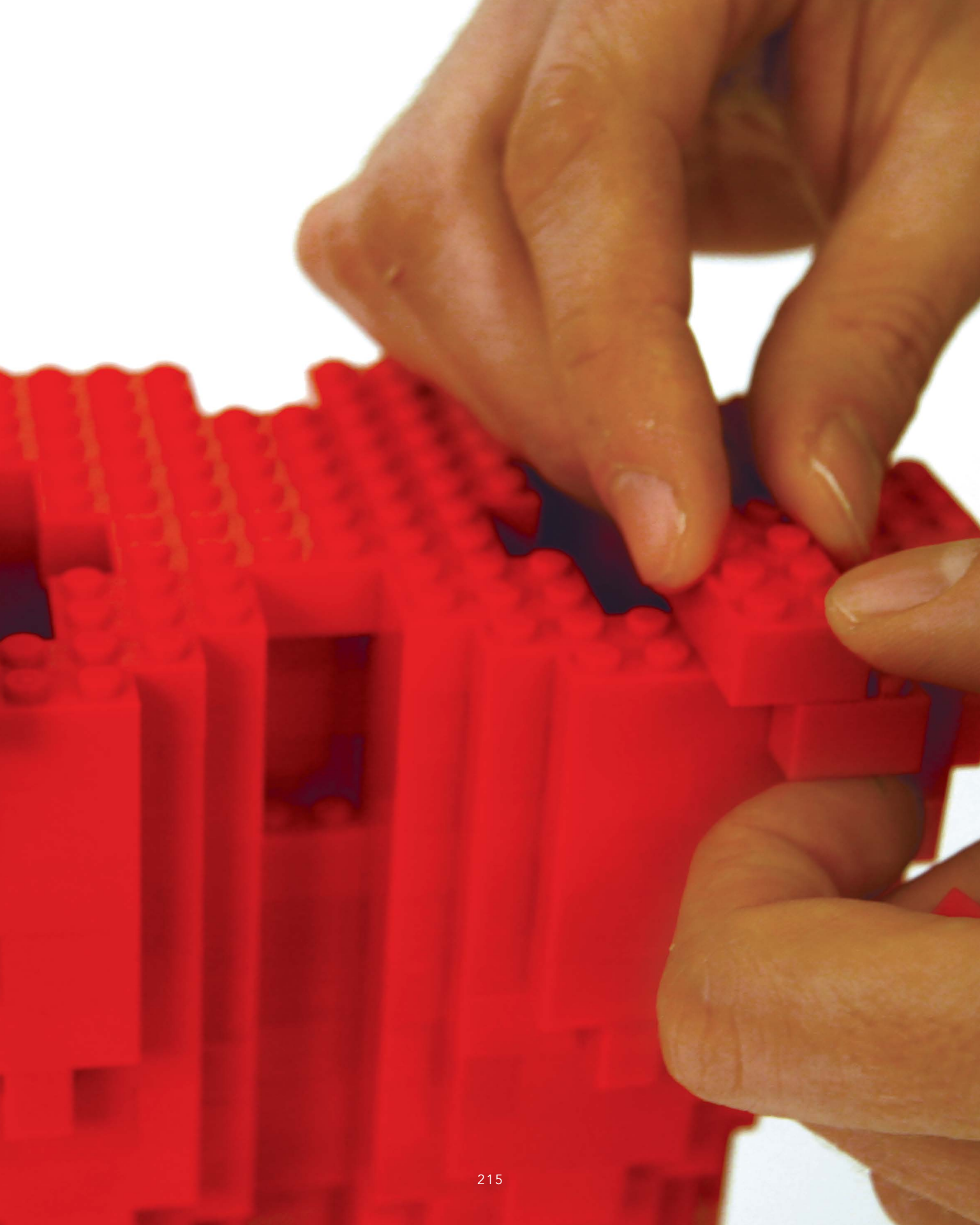
THE ARC
ASCENSION

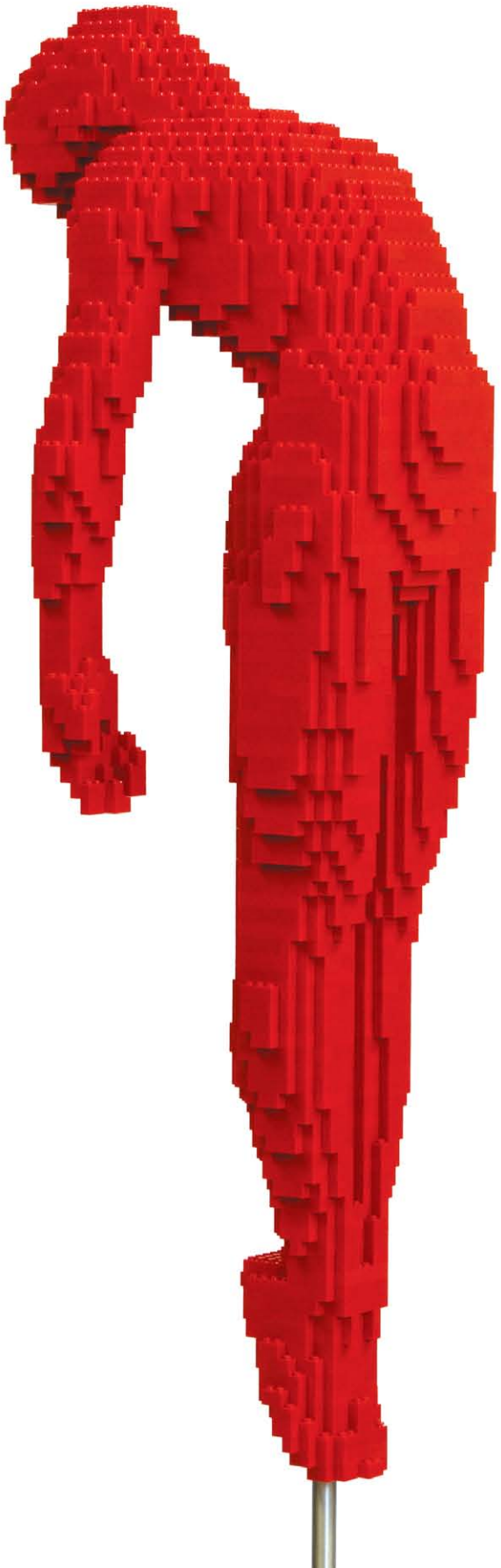
Art must be an expression of love, or it is nothing.
—Marc Chagall

Sometimes the meaning of a piece of art changes with time, and that's certainly the case with *Ascension*. Originally it was the final piece in a series I created for the Agora Gallery in New York at the end of 2010. Each piece was a human figure going through some kind of emotional turbulence. The figures began in poses of entrapment and containment, before themes of love and freedom began to emerge. The penultimate piece is of two figures engaged in a kiss before the last piece, *Ascension*. The figures were laid out in an arc in the gallery space so that viewers were led through the story in sequence.

What most people who went to the show didn't know was that the protagonist in each piece was me, and the story being told was that of my love with Courtney. In fact, she didn't know it was about us until just before the show opened and I walked her through the exhibition, just the two of us. *Ascension* was my way of saying that she had released me through love and that I was rising up to be the man I could be.

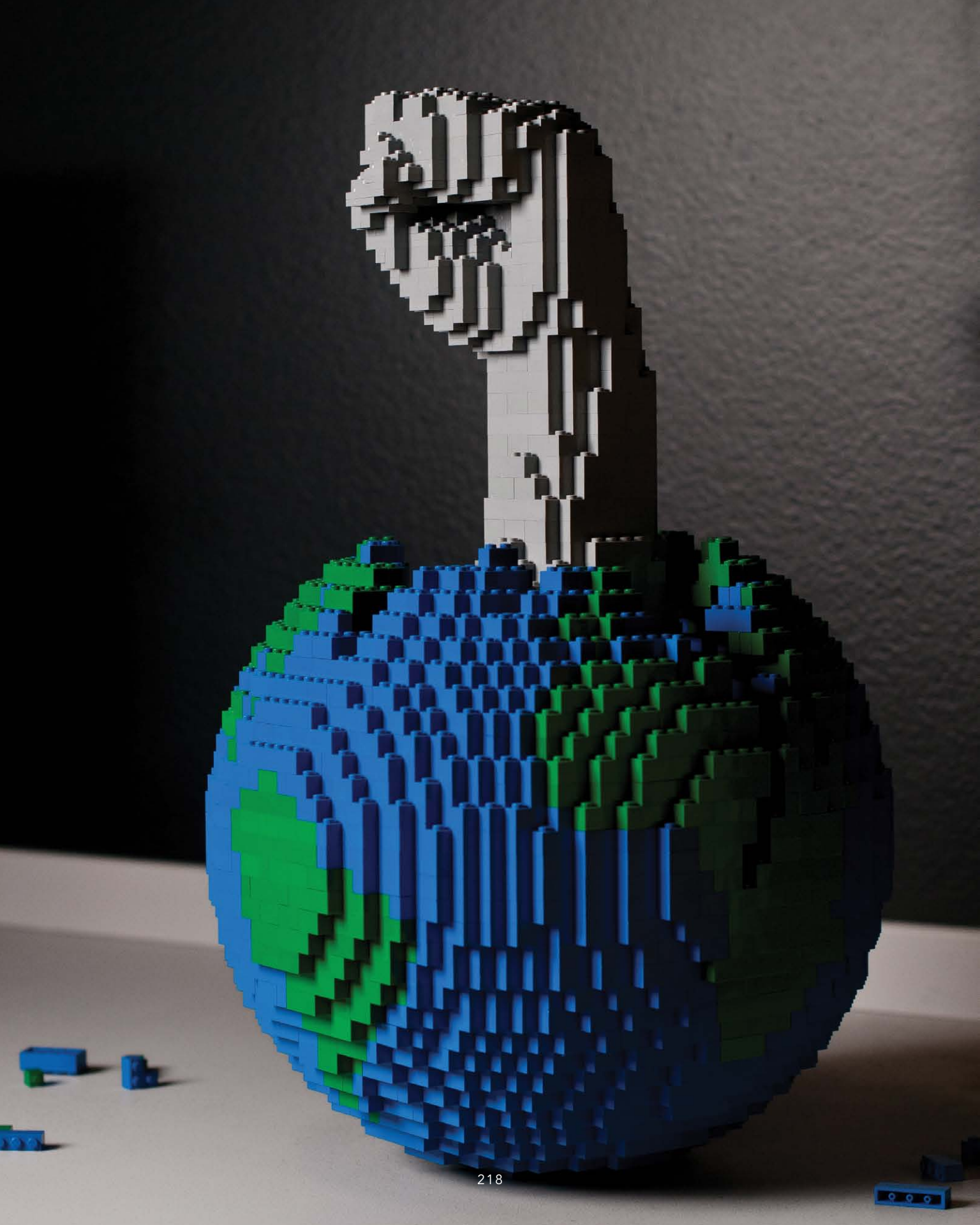
For reasons that I never intended, people immediately read spiritual undertones into the cycle. In fact, the director of that gallery was going to purchase *Ascension* but at the last minute declined and apologized, saying it was "too religious-y." And *Ascension* has never sold. Being raised Catholic, I heard the phrase "as he ascended into heaven" quite a lot, so I suppose that's what people related to. For me, *Ascension* is just about trying to rise above the fray.





Now, *Ascension* tours without its companion pieces around the world and, like *Yellow*, is seen and understood as a standalone work rather than as part of a series. Now even I look at it differently. I see the way the feet are close together and the toes and legs point down; it does look an awful lot like a crucifix. This positioning was originally done for far more prosaic reasons: I couldn't hang anything from the ceiling in the first gallery, so I needed to keep the feet and legs together tightly so that the piece would sit on the metal pole that held it up. In my most recent New York show, we displayed it hanging; if I had been able to do that from the start, perhaps the feet might have been a little more separate, and the same analogies may not have been drawn.

As an artist, you don't always have to be perfectly understood. In fact, it's nice to see people dive into the art and see something that you never intended, something that was there all along, but you did not know it.



THE WORLD OF PRESIDENT CLINTON GLOBE

If you live long enough, you'll make mistakes. But if you learn from them, you'll be a better person. It's how you handle adversity, not how it affects you. The main thing is never quit, never quit, never quit.
—President Bill Clinton

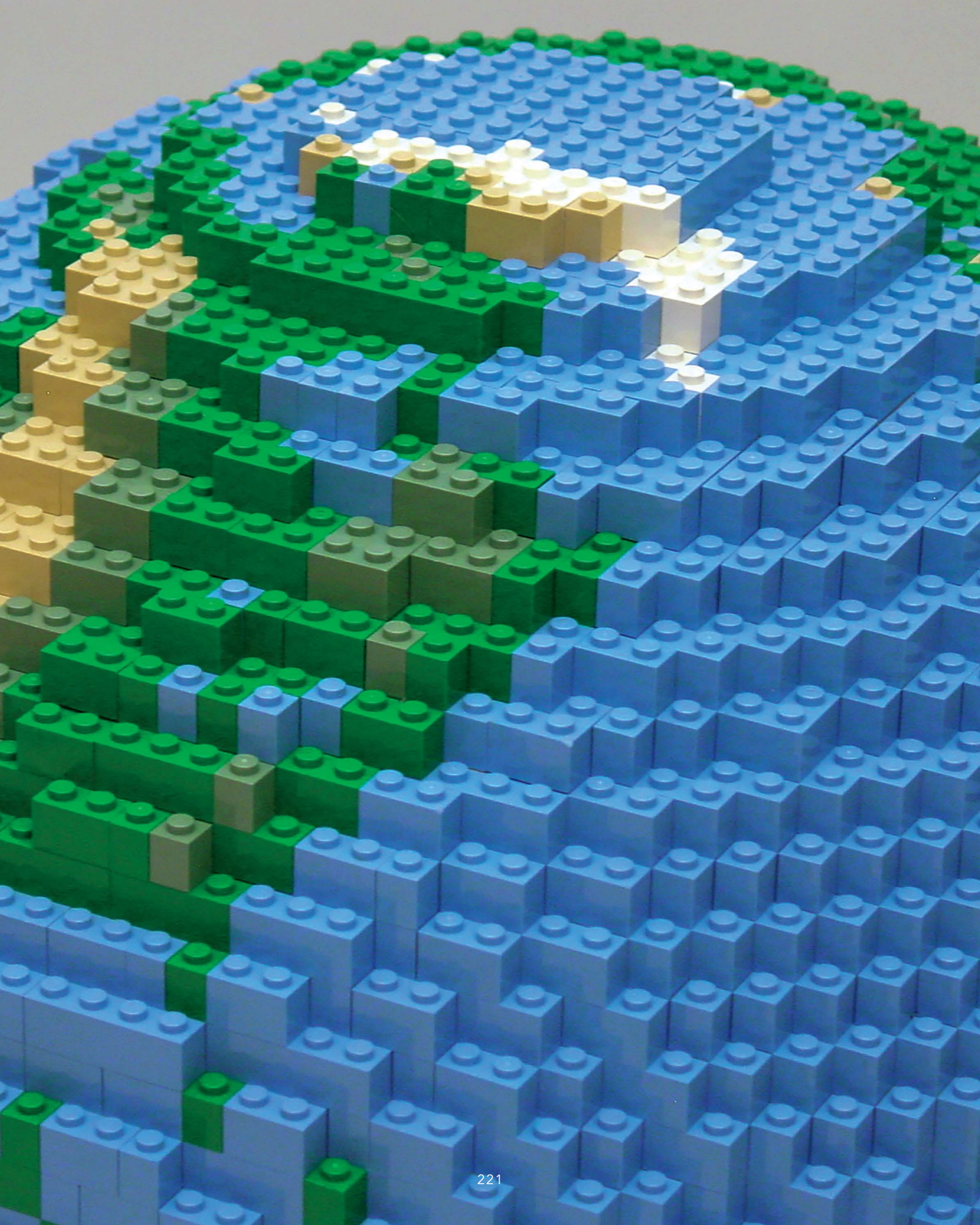
In 2011 and 2012, I had my art on display at the Clinton Presidential Library in Little Rock, Arkansas. I was thrilled enough to have an exhibition at such an amazing venue, but a few months later I got a call from the Clinton camp, saying, "If you can find the time, the president would like to meet you." You're not asked to meet a president every day, so Courtney and I flew back to Little Rock. I'd heard that President Clinton collected globes, so I made him one and put it in my carry-on.

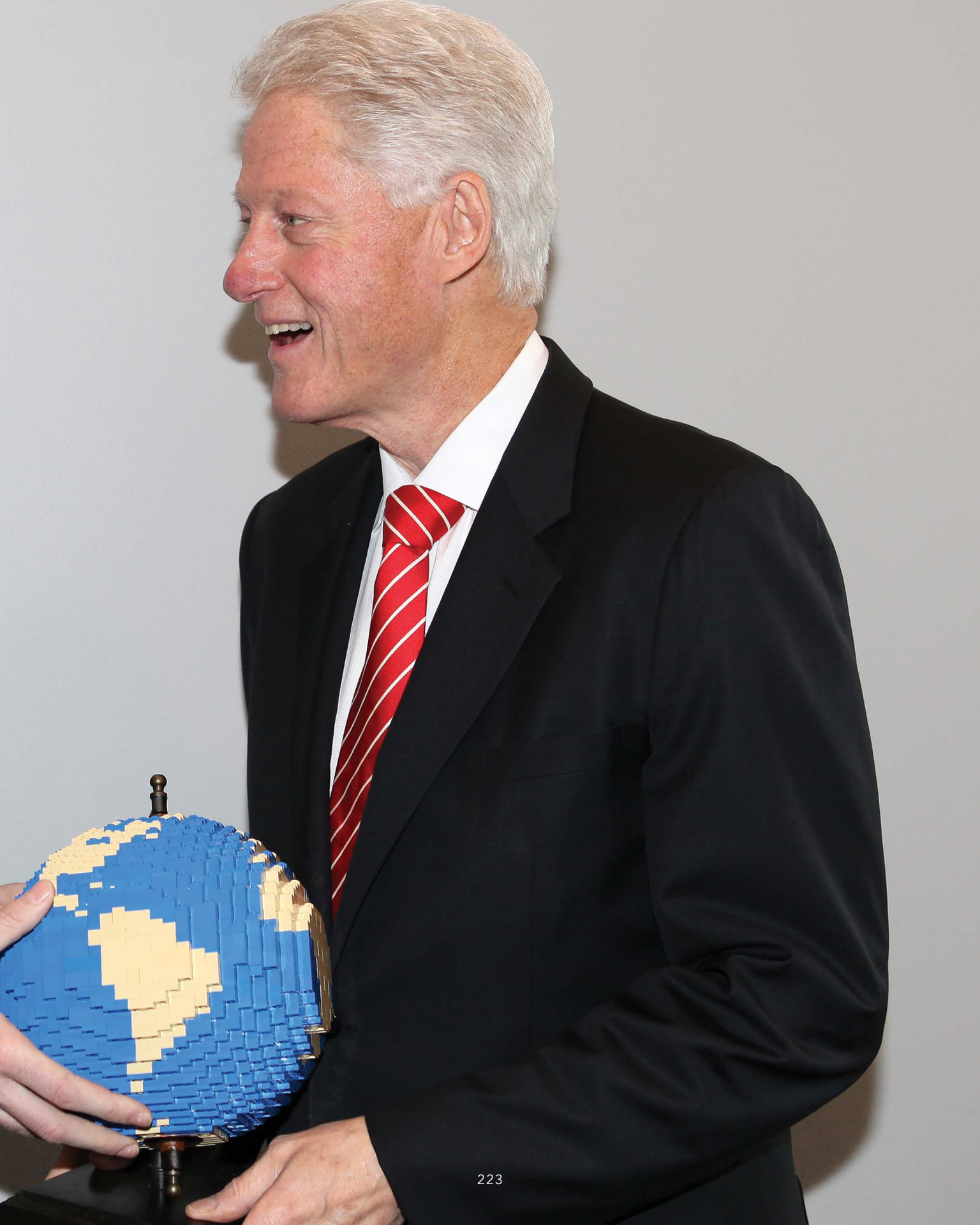
We arrived at the library, and they said that I would literally have two minutes with him to just say hi and take a picture, and that would be it. I was more than happy with that. Of course, things seemed to get even more frantic, and a staffer simply asked us to meet him as he was getting out of the elevator, for a quick hello before he vanished for a press conference. Well, President Clinton came out of the elevator, and I was completely starstruck.

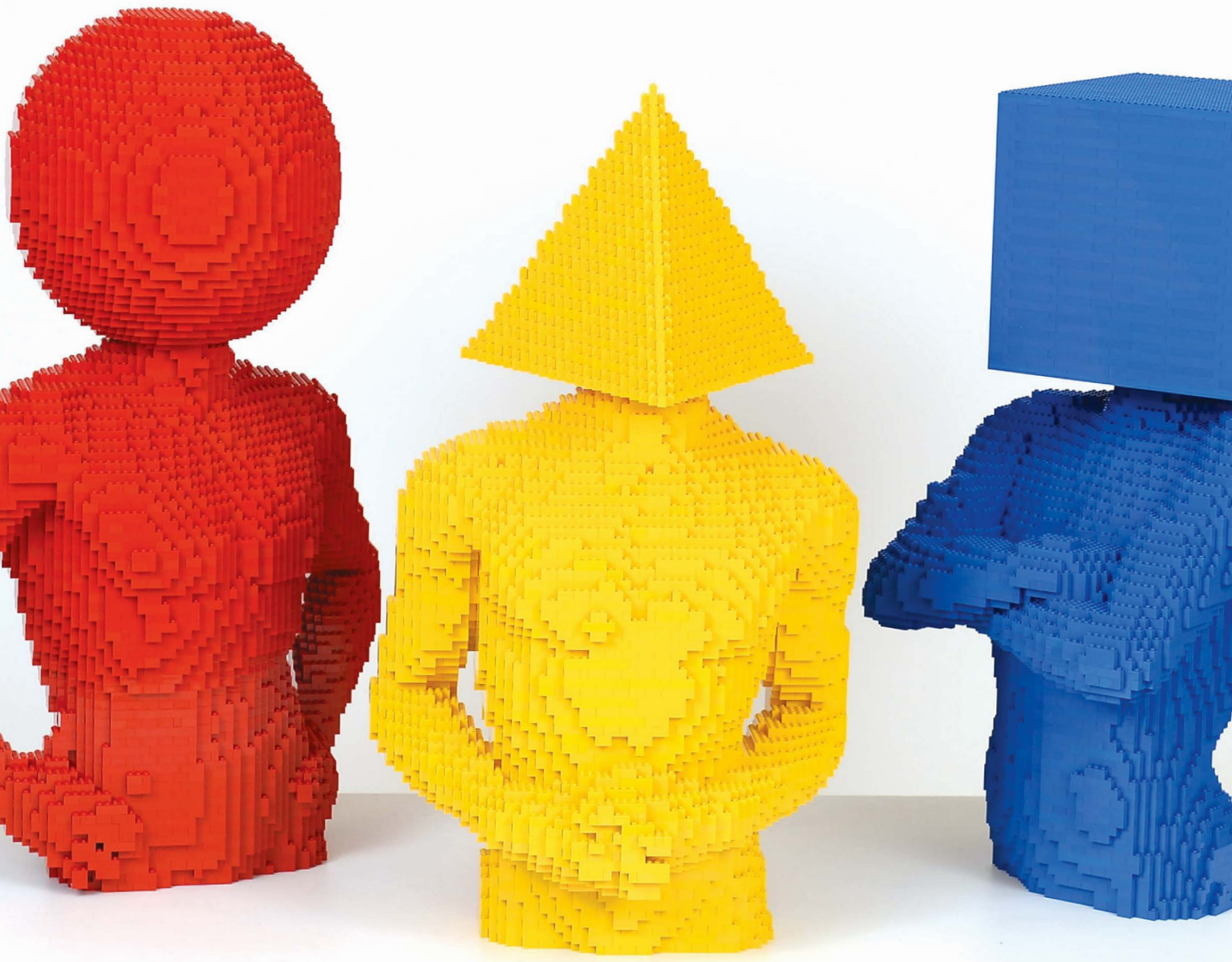
Being an ex-lawyer, I'm pretty good at talking, but the whole leader-of-the-free-world thing really got the better of me. Fortunately, Courtney was there to help me find my words.

We presented the globe, and President Clinton was so nice and very complimentary about my work. Then he said, "Why don't you come into this press conference with me?" So he pulled us into this room, and he introduced us to all these amazing people who are lined up, waiting to talk to him. He spoke about getting arts into education, and about the Thea Foundation. He finished his press conference and we're still by his side, and there are more people to meet, when a little boy comes up and says, "I want to get my picture with you." President Clinton says, "Of course, of course, right here, son," and the boy replies, "No, not you! With the LEGO guy!"

The president laughed louder than anyone.







THE MASTERS OF CREATIVITY CIRCLE, TRIANGLE, AND SQUARE

Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.
—Scott Adams

These three sculptures are in the three primary colors: red, yellow, and blue. All other colors come from mixing these three colors together. These figures also bear the primary shapes, the building blocks that are used to make up everything in the universe: the circle, the triangle, and the square.

THUMBS UP TATTOO

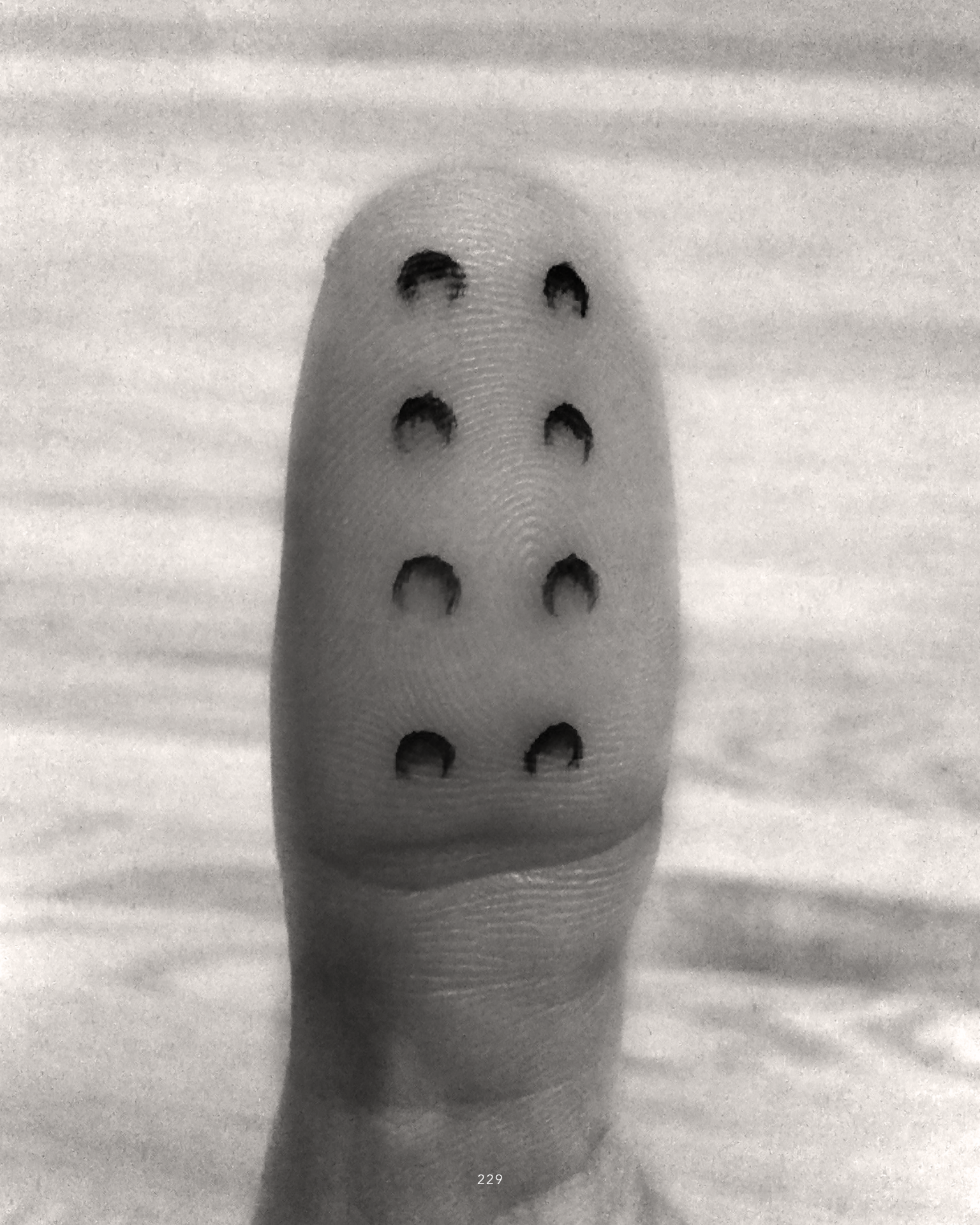
My body is my journal, and my tattoos are my story.
—Johnny Depp

The tattoo? I felt like I needed something permanent. LEGO art had become a part of me, so I thought I might as well make it formal. I'm also quite proud of what I do. The idea of a LEGO artist didn't exist 10 years ago!

When I'm at an airport going through customs and have to fill out that "What's your employment?" form, I always put "LEGO artist." When I'm questioned further (and I'm *always* questioned further), I pull out a catalog of my work, everyone gets a good laugh, and then I go on to where I have to be. By this point, I pretty much always carry a copy of my portfolio, just to prove I'm legit!

I meet other LEGO artists from time to time, and when I do, it's half *Band of Brothers* and half turf-fight. When someone says, "Hi, I'm a LEGO artist," it's something like saying, "I'm an astronaut," because *nobody* becomes a LEGO artist. It's so foreign as a job, but there is a bond. Because when you use this medium, you know things about it that other people just don't understand. You know what it takes to build something, the patience you have to have, the struggle that you have with glue or shipping or other everyday LEGO-artist things. Almost nobody on the planet would know about that except this person you have a connection with. Because you've been there. I was in Israel with this guy, and he was excited to have his work on exhibit; when one of his little structures broke, boy, was I feeling his pain.

I'm sure other artists have that feeling: "All art is temporary, after all." But there's something different about LEGO bricks because of the way they're designed to fall apart.



Originally I had a LEGO tattoo on my thumb. I use my thumb all day to press down the bricks, so I get an impression of the little bumps on them. The idea was to formalize that into a tattoo. So I was in Vegas (where else?), and the tattoo artist said, "You want what?" After explaining, I actually had to pull out my book again and show him: "This is what I do." And then he got it. It was only three months, with all the wear and tear that I put my thumb through, before the tattoo was completely rubbed off. I learned subsequently that the thumb regenerates its skin very fast, almost faster than any other part of the body.

Now knowing that my thumb was not the best place for a brick tattoo, I decided to put a replacement one on my wrist. I went to another tattoo shop and took a 2×4 brick, pressed it into the underside of my wrist, and told the artist, "Just fill it in."


Library
ENGINE 24

LEARNING SOMETHING THE REBIRTH OF NEW ORLEANS

As bad as it is here, it's better than being somewhere else.—Chris Rose

I think most adult Americans can remember where they were when Hurricane Katrina roared out of the Gulf of Mexico and into the heart of New Orleans. Most of us can remember watching and wondering, *How could this possibly happen in this country?* And then, in the aftermath, I think most of us can remember thinking, *How are we ever going to fix this?* Few of us, I think, knew even where to begin.

However, the New Orleans Public Library had a brilliant idea: Don't ask America's grown-ups; ask the children. The library launched a campaign, asking children from all across the country to draw and write about what they felt was important for the rebuilding of New Orleans. Then I was lucky enough to be asked to represent these thoughts and ideas in a sculpture. There were thousands of pictures to sort through, but I soon noticed that no matter where the drawing or painting came from, all the kids had very similar ideas about what was important for a city. It would need a fire station, a hospital, schools, and a park. They were drawn in different styles and colors, but I saw the same themes repeated again and again. Other ideas included hotels, houses, and libraries. I really wanted to capture the look of the drawings by making the buildings brightly colored, slightly crooked or slanted in places, and with windows that didn't always line up.

The unveiling of the piece was to be my first press conference ever. But my anxiety fell away as we flew into New Orleans and I saw just how many houses were still covered in tarps 12 months after the storm.

I'd been in the city for the first time the year before the hurricane and had what you might call a typical Bourbon Street experience with friends. I'd seen the city so full of life, and now those same downtown streets were deserted still. It shook me up coming face-to-face with it. At the press conference, though, filled with bright, whip-smart third graders, it seemed to me that in the children's vision and enthusiasm were all the answers New Orleans needed.

LOVE LETTER TO NEW YORK LIBERTY

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free. —Emma Lazarus

On September 11, 2001, I was living in an apartment near Gramercy Park, about three miles from the World Trade Center. I worked uptown, right near Grand Central Station, but my girlfriend at the time worked for a firm in the South Tower. At 8:46 on most mornings, she'd generally be at her desk or somewhere near it, 70 or so stories above the ground.

But at 8:46 this particular morning, she wasn't. She'd been working long hours and had worked until one in the morning that particular day, and we hadn't seen too much of each other. So when she found me eating my bowl of Froot Loops in the kitchen, I said, "Why don't you have breakfast?" She never ate breakfast, but for some reason she said, "They look good," put down her bag and keys, and decided to join me. She still jokes to this day that Froot Loops saved her life.

The TV was on, but we were talking and not really watching. But when we saw the breaking news, we ran up to the roof of my apartment building, which had a clear view of the Twin Towers. And that's where we were when the second plane hit the South Tower, just a few floors above her law firm.


I ART
NY

Normal days have a particular rhythm to them, where time knows how to move around you. The tick of the clock tells you when to rise, when to eat, when to work, when to stop, when to socialize, and when to rest. But that day, time wasn't working at all. It just stopped at 8:46 and spent the rest of the daylight hours in a suspended state, spinning around itself. You didn't know whether to stand or sit, laugh or cry, talk or be silent.

They closed down the Brooklyn Bridge, and I had a lot of people from the other side of the river stay at my apartment because they just couldn't get home. We sat in shock, watching TV all day and thinking how close we were to losing her.

For native New Yorkers, on most days, the Statue of Liberty is an unremarkable part of the furniture. A brushstroke in the backdrop to 20 million busy, complicated lives. If you've ever caught the Staten Island Ferry, you'll know what I mean. While the tourists go crazy taking photos and videos, New Yorkers don't even look up from their newspapers or phones as they pass right by her. But in the days after 9/11, New Yorkers saw Liberty as the rest of the world does: a symbol of hope and proof that whatever happens, compassion and love will endure.

New York had its heart torn open that day, and Liberty helped all of us understand that there would always be better days ahead—just as she helped millions of immigrants like my grandparents understand that there would always be better days ahead. People are remarkably resilient and resourceful creatures; we always seem to find a way to pick up the pieces of life and put them back in a way that's better than before.

Nearly 12 years after 9/11, my first big show in New York was just a few weeks away from opening. The venue in Times Square had been secured, the posters had been printed, floor plans had been drawn, revised, and finalized. Artworks had been flown from various points around the world. Everything was ready. Except that it wasn't. There was something missing. I realized that I needed to make something for the city that has let me call it "home." Something that showed what I had learned about her. So we moved everything around to make a space, and almost as the first people came through the museum door, I placed the last brick on *Liberty.*

POINT IN TIME
COURTNEY IN BLACK

I never put much stock in love at first sight, but when I saw Courtney for the first time, I knew I wanted to be with her for the rest of my life. It would be a long while before we would actually go out on a date, but when we finally did, we ended up at a French restaurant (I tried to keep it fancy). At first, we were both nervous, studying our menus in silence. But the conversation warmed up, and by the time our food came, we were talking as if we'd known each for years. We didn't eat a bite.

The restaurant was in a mall (okay, so not that fancy), and I walked her out to her car. She looked up at the sky and closed her eyes, lit by a flickering light from the stark parking lot. Sometimes it's not about the perfect location. It's not about the perfect meal. But sometimes it still can be the perfect moment.

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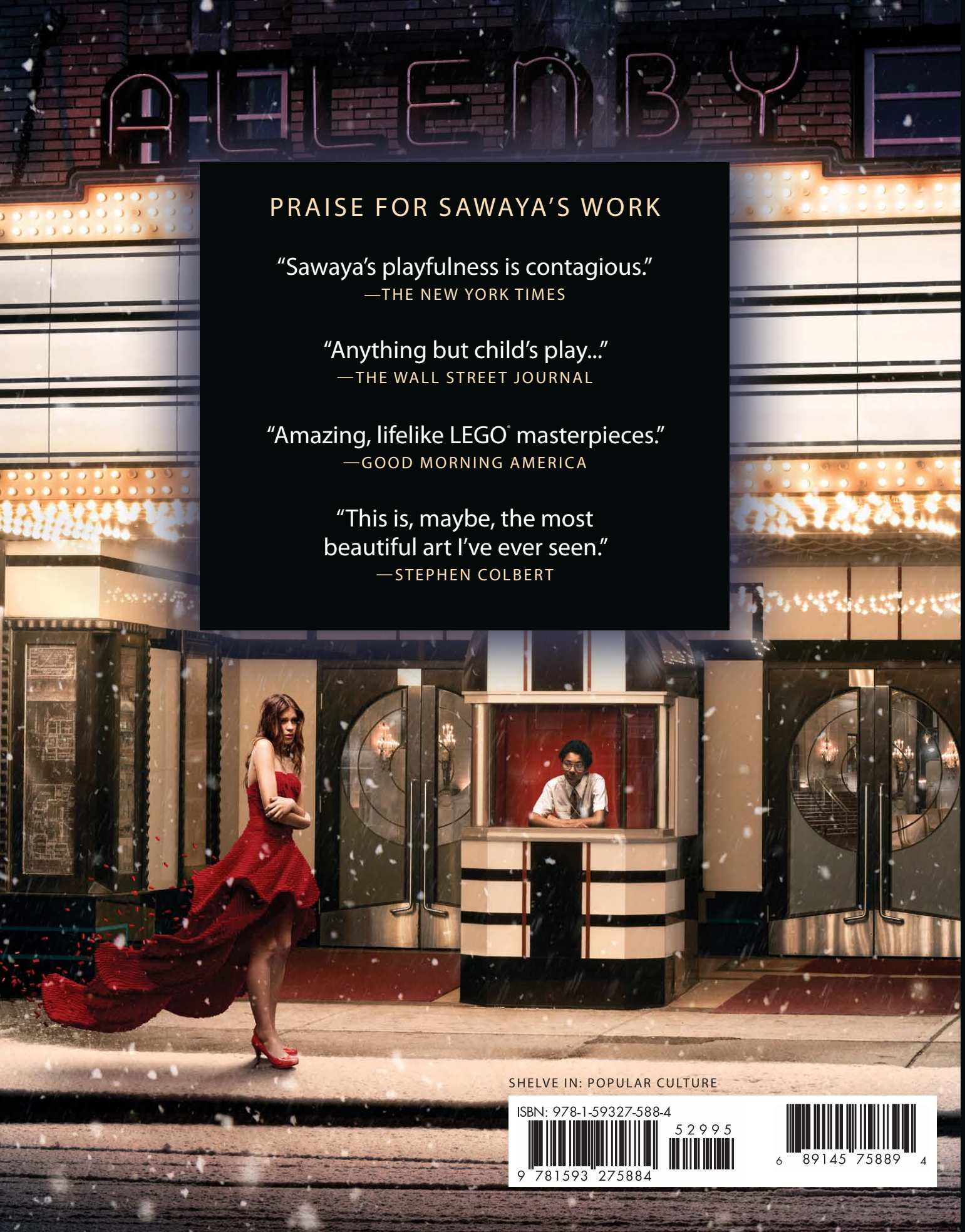

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