On a tree-covered path on the west side of deCordova's grounds is a clearing overlooking Flint's Pond. Here, Cat Mazza chose to install her sculpture *Taking the Cure*, an open wooden structure that offers both shelter from, and exposure to, the natural elements. The location is integral to the artwork, which was inspired by the architecture of nineteenth-century “cure cottages”: make-shift wooden buildings situated in natural settings designed to heal patients suffering from tuberculosis. By combining historic design elements with contemporary sculpture, Mazza forges a connection between past and present, inviting visitors to engage with the artwork and its environs by simply breathing in fresh air—just as tuberculosis patients would have—to convalesce over anxieties that result from our current social and political climate.

*Taking the Cure* is a commission by Mazza, a mid-career artist whose work has focused on gender and labor issues, specifically through the lens of textiles and technology. Past projects include the collaborative artwork *Nike Blanket Petition* (2003-08), whereby Mazza organized an international group of knit and crochet hobbyists to create a fifteen-foot-wide blanket of the Nike Swoosh logo to promote fair labor policies for the corporation’s garment workers across the globe. More recently, Mazza examined historical labor conditions of the American textile industry in the project *Labor Sister Sampler 1824-1999* (2016) (inside cover). Delving deep into a research-based practice, she identified a historical moment in each of the fifty states when women played key roles in labor activism, and incorporated their stories into a hand- and machine-knit map of the United States. Massachusetts features the 1844 Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, where mill girls organized for a ten-hour workday.

Mazza’s enduring interest in textile labor issues led her to investigate cure cottages, as tuberculosis is often associated with poor factory working conditions, especially for female laborers. These outdoor huts situated in nature could not have been more different from the crowded, dirty, and unsanitary conditions to which workers were subject. Furthermore, craft activities, including needlework, were promoted in the cure cottages, prescribed as part of the healing process.

The exterior of *Taking the Cure* features a wooden L-shape structure that recalls porch or balcony balustrades, while
inside, a vertical free-standing construction resembles the cure cottage framework. Protected on three sides, this interior space provides a feeling of safety. While an overhang on the pond-side wall gives the semblance of a roof, the structure is fully exposed to the elements. A breeze can permeate the artwork as it would the branches of a tree. *Taking the Cure* is made of kiln-dried pine, echoing the humble materials of the original cure cottages, and its weathered, tinted white color also aligns with nineteenth-century New England vernacular architecture. The ten-foot-square structure is large enough for people to move through it, as well as to sit on the folding stools and relax their bodies and minds.

While tuberculosis is an ancient disease, a major resurgence in the United States and Europe in the 1800s correlated to mass urbanization and industrialization. It spread rapidly through working-class neighborhoods because of poor air quality and cramped living conditions. Until this time, the only known cures for tuberculosis, documented as early as the classical era by the Greek physicians Hippocrates (c. 460–c. 375 BCE) and Galen (c. 130–c. 210 CE), were fresh air and rest. Modern doctors such as Edward Livingston Trudeau (1848–1915) realized that isolation was just as important, as tuberculosis is highly contagious. Trudeau was a founder of a group of cure cottages in Saranac Lake, New York, which became one of the first renowned treatment centers for the disease. Around the same time, the Massachusetts State Sanatoria established four locations dedicated to treating tuberculosis in Lakeville, Westfield, North Reading, and Rutland. These sites typically included a central house surrounded by small, makeshift cottages in remote natural landscapes where very contagious patients could be confined. There were certain shared features among the different structures that were essential to early
sanatorium design: deep verandas, balconies, and covered walkways.\(^1\) In other words, there were plenty of spaces that provided free circulation of fresh air, where patients would sit in reclining chairs and receive treatment (fig. 1).

Mazza incorporates design elements from historic cure cottages into her sculpture. She notes that she is “fascinated by the human will to ‘get better’ and cultural trends of ‘self-care,’ and how this manifested in cure spaces like open-air lounging in natural climates in nineteenth- and twentieth-century structures before there was an effective medical treatment for tuberculosis.”\(^2\) In *Taking the Cure*, Mazza designed intricate lattice decoration on both the interior and exterior woodwork, which recalls a specific form that can be found in many of the houses and cure cottages (fig. 2). The double cross, featuring six arms, relates to the Star of Life, a symbol used by medical services in America.\(^3\) The crosses are embedded within

Fig. 2
the architecture of the piece, interlaced with vertical batons characteristic of more traditional railings. Just as the crosses would have operated on the cure cottages, they indicate a space of healing in Taking the Cure (fig. 3). In addition, Mazza replicated elements such as large open windows, a feature that facilitated air flow and was specifically designed to help the body repair itself.

Artists have long been concerned with the toll of tuberculosis on the human body, especially during the nineteenth century when the illness took the lives of so many people. Claude Monet rendered his wife on her deathbed in his 1879 painting Camille Monet sur son lit de mort. Edvard Munch explored the theme throughout his career. The tragic deaths of his mother and sister from the disease resulted in two important paintings: The Sick Child (1885–86) and The Dead Mother (1899–1900). In the twentieth century, Alice Neel depicted a tuberculosis patient in the painting T. B. Harlem (1940), calling attention to the illness’ stigma in relation to poverty and urban slum conditions in New York City. Treatment in those years was drastic, and the representation shows Carlos Negrón, a twenty-four-year-old immigrant from Puerto Rico, with a bandage on his chest from a thoracoplasty, a surgical procedure that permanently collapses the lungs by removing the ribs from the chest wall. Almost Christ-like, Neel’s rendering of the patient evokes empathy while preserving his dignity.

While artists have historically been concerned with romanticizing the disease or focusing on the heightened emotions resulting from the loss of life to the illness, Mazza was most interested in its treatment. She looked to historical spaces for healing as inspiration. Also known as “consumption” and “white plague,” the causes and cures of tuberculosis were not yet fully understood in the nineteenth century, and the resulting fear and anxiety resembled how today’s social crises result in general angst and divisiveness. In Taking the Cure, Mazza addresses tuberculosis and its treatment as a metaphor for a variety of current social issues like “youth gun violence in schools, right-wing authoritarians, opioid addiction, sexual abuse in the workplace, and race-based violence and discrimination,” which take a toll on individual and collective health. What might be the cure for such a range of problems? This is a question far too broad and complex to be answered by any one artist or artwork. And yet, by creating an open, interactive sculpture, Mazza invites participants to take the time to think about our collective struggles towards physical, mental, and social wellness.
Almost as a satellite to the Museum—much like the cure cottages were to the main Sanatoria buildings—*Taking the Cure* is sited in deCordova’s idyllic park grounds, surrounded by trees and water. Ultimately, Mazza’s sculpture provides space for individuals to expose themselves to the curative power of nature, as a way to guide them through today’s social and political anxieties.

Martina Tanga, Koch Curatorial Fellow


2 Cat Mazza, email exchange with the author, June 15, 2018.

3 The origins of the six-pointed cross can be traced to early Christian symbolism. Its meaning was creation and cosmic unity. See Nicholas Whitehead, *Magical Christianity: The Power of Symbols for Spiritual Renewal* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2007), 62-63. It was more officially institutionalized as a medical symbol for emergency services in the 1970s by the United States Department of Transportation. The cross is blue with a rod of Asclepius in the center, and can be found, for instance, on ambulances.


5 Cat Mazza, email exchange with the author, June 15, 2018.
BIOGRAPHY

Cat Mazza (b. 1977, Washington, D.C.) earned a BFA from Carnegie Mellon University, where she specialized in Art and Gender Studies, and completed an MFA at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, concentrating in Electronic Arts. Mazza has exhibited at Garanti Gallery, Istanbul, Turkey; the Jönköpings läns Museum, Sweden; the Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin; the Museum of Art and Design, London; and the Triennale Design Museum, Milan. She has also exhibited at new media festivals, including Ars Electronica, Linz, Austria; FILE, São Paulo, Brazil; Futuresonic, Manchester, England; and The Influencers, Barcelona. Mazza is currently Associate Professor of Art at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

PLATFORM

PLATFORM is a series of one-person commissioned projects by early- and mid-career artists from New England, national, and international art communities that engage with deCordova’s unique landscape. The PLATFORM series lets artists expand their practice and visitors experience new approaches to contemporary sculpture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to PM-6 Joinery, owned and operated by Peter Benson of Hopkinton, NH. Additional thanks to Jim Finn, UMB Faculty Staff Union, John Hess, Erik Levine, Brian Glaser, Gale Perkins, Brian Dumser, Nia Duong, Brian Reynolds of Lakeville Historical Society, and the Massachusetts State Archives.

RELATED EVENTS

Craft Event with PLATFORM Artist Cat Mazza
Saturday, July 28, 4–6 pm
As artist and participants work together to create a woven textile piece, Mazza will talk about the history of cure cottages in New England and how it has inspired her commission for deCordova.