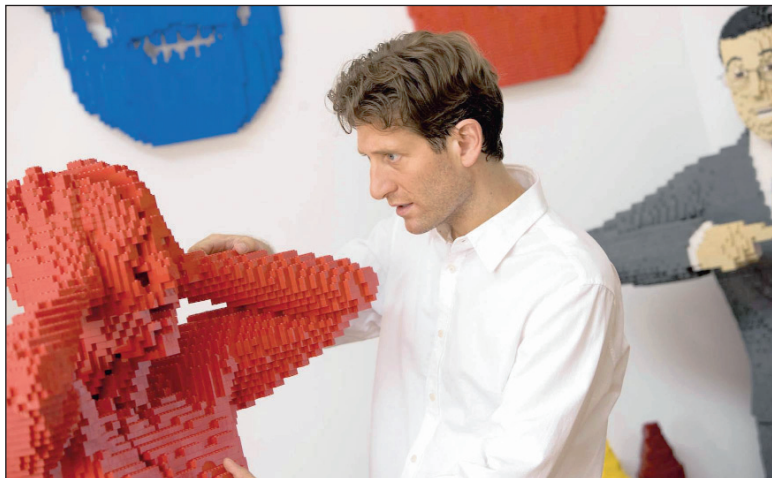
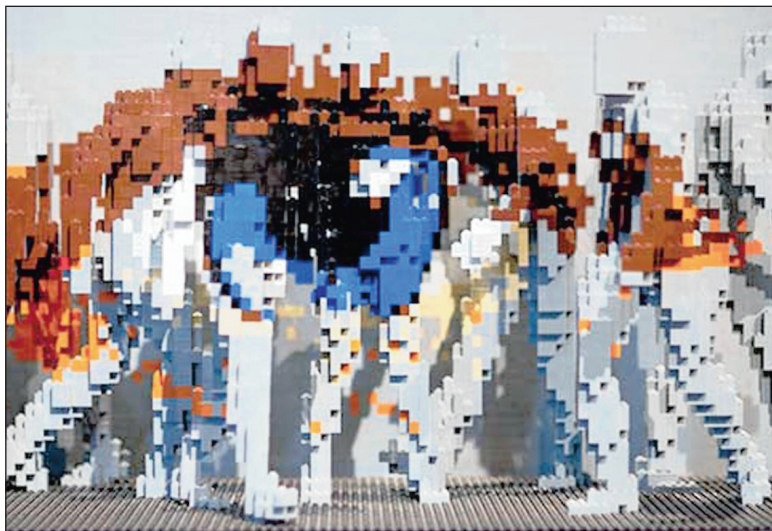


# Not just another brick in the wall

*Eugene Yiga chats to artist Nathan Sawaya about his fascinating LEGO exhibition*



*TOYING WITH ART: New York-based artist Nathan Sawaya who is best-known for creating contemporary art out of LEGO pieces, at work, engaged with his creations.*  
*ON THE COVER: His interpretation of the Edvard Munch painting The Scream*



Los Angeles art studios. He continues to create daily while accepting commission work from around the world. He designs and builds custom creations for private collectors, events, photo shoots and conventions. On occasion, he makes himself available for speaking requests and is also the author of two best-selling books.

"No matter where you heart wants to lead you, there will be hands that try to hold you back," he says. "Life's challenge is to find the strength to break free..."

"I had gone from this job where it was all day sitting in an office, working on paper work, to being an

artist and getting to create whatever I could imagine."

The exhibition features 75 original artworks built from more than a million LEGO bricks.

Sections include Portrait, Human Expression, Painted Bricks, The Sculpture Garden, and A New World.

"The museum exhibition is accessible because it engages the child in all of us while simultaneously illuminating sophisticated and complex concepts," he says.

"Everyone can relate to the medium since it is a toy that many children have at home. But my goal with this exhibition when it first

**D**URING his childhood in Oregon, in the US, artist Nathan Sawaya drew cartoons, wrote stories, and perfected magic tricks. But when he got his first LEGO set at the age of 5, he found something new to play with.

"I started building immediately," he says. "It was really a moment for me when I realised you don't have to build what's on the front of the box."

He now has an exhibition called *The Art of the Brick*, in Joburg, after a successful run in Cape Town.

When Sawaya went to college at New York University, he brought the LEGO bricks with him. But even though his goal was to be an artist, he went to law school.

Still, because he needed a creative outlet when he came home at night, he chose to pick up the bricks. "When I was a lawyer I quickly came to realise I was more comfortable sitting on the floor creating sculptures than I was sitting in a boardroom negotiating contracts," he says.

"My own personal conflicts and fears, coupled with a deep desire for overall happiness, paved the way to becoming a full-time artist."

After years of million-dollar mergers and corporate acquisitions, Sawaya realised he preferred creating art. And so, with encouragement from his family and friends, he took the plunge.

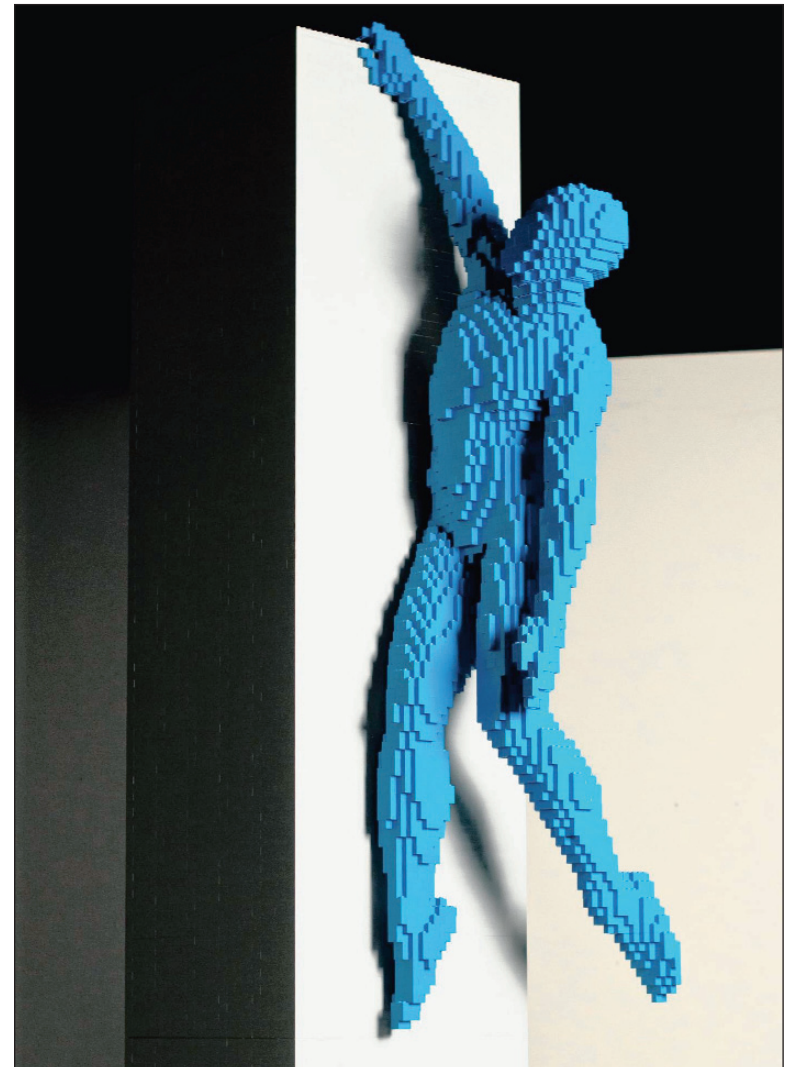
"Taking a leap is hard," he says. "There was nothing wrong with being a lawyer, but I always knew there was another me, an 'artist me', lurking inside. Then one day I decided to let the artist in me out, and I never looked back."

Why does he create art of out LEGO bricks? Because it's fun and because nobody had ever done it before. He'd seen sculptures out of all other sorts of media but not out of LEGO.

"I like creating art because I like the way it makes me feel," he says.

"Just sitting down and putting those bricks in my hand, snapping them together. It's like the whole world snapping into place."

Today Sawaya has more than 2.5 million bricks in his New York and



debuted in 2007 was to elevate this simple plaything to a place it has never been before."

Popular sculptures include *Yellow* (Sawaya's most famous work to date, featured in Lady Gaga's music video *G.U.Y.*) and a T-Rex skeleton constructed from over 80 000 LEGO bricks and measuring over 6m in length. "This is one of the largest sculptures I have ever made," he says. "It took an entire summer to build and nearly drove me crazy trying to make it work."

"After seeing so many kids flock to my first solo exhibition, I wanted to give back something and create a sculpture that children would enjoy. What's better than a dinosaur?"

Many of Sawaya's works centre on the phenomenon of how everyday life, people, and raw emotion intertwine. And part of what he does is challenge himself to create unexpected things, all out of little rectangular bricks.

He finds inspiration in his own experiences, the journeys he takes, and the people he meets. It's why he carries a sketchpad with him wherever he goes.

"A lot of people ask me about where I get my inspiration," he says. "And it's a tough question because inspiration comes from so many different places. There is something great about walking around a city and using it for inspiration so that by the time I'm done I have an idea for a new piece."

One of the exhibit's most interesting sections is *Human Condition*, which is where Sawaya seems to create something new rather than reproduce what we already know. It's also here where he explains what it was like to leave his law career behind and make the bold move to LEGO art.

"My favourite subject is the human form," he says. "A lot of my work suggests a figure in transition. It represents the metamorphosis I am experiencing in my life. My pieces grow out of my fears and accomplishments, as a lawyer and as an artist, as a boy and as a man."

At the end of it all, visitors can try their hand at making their own LEGO sculptures in a building zone or embarrass themselves by losing

**Pencil in date to see LEGO display**

**THE Art of the Brick at TheZone@Rosebank runs until August 2. Tickets are available from Computicket at a cost of R140 for adults and R95 for children under 18 (entry for kids under 2 is free). For school bookings, please e-mail Freya at freya@exporsa.co.za.**

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to children at PlayStation's LEGO *Batman 3: Beyond Gotham* games.

"The exhibition engages the child in all of us while at the same time highlighting sophisticated and complex concepts," he says.

"I use LEGO in my art because the toy is accessible. Chances are you probably don't have a slab of marble or ceramic kiln at home, but I bet you have some LEGO.

"In the end, the point is to inspire the artist in everyone, young and old. Why? Because art nurtures the brain, art makes us better humans, art is necessary in understanding the world, and art makes people happy. Art is not optional.

"There are no rules to art. You can create with whatever you find.

"For me, I just chose LEGO bricks. (But) you can create with whatever you have at home. Remember, it all starts with one brick," Sawaya says.

The artist encourages visitors to go ahead and create: what you see, what you feel, or what's never been done before. Just create.

"Let your big ideas flow," he says. "When you let your creativity loose, be it in writing, art, music or whatever, your ideas take a life of their own.

"So take those big ideas and set them free."