Playing with the Past: Transmutation and Metamorphosis

This exhibition has its genesis in a visit by Jennifer McCandless, the Director of the Sue E. and Eugene Mercy Jr. Gallery at The Loomis Chaffee School, to one of the galleries of The Waskowmium, believed to be the largest collection of Contemporary Visual Art in Northern New England, located in Burlington, Vermont. Jennifer and I started putting together a list of artists whose work we wanted to expose through this show. Soon, a thread emerged which connected nearly all of the works selected: transmutation and metamorphosis, in both a literal and conceptual manner. The techniques, although updated and often using modern tools and technology, clearly owe their existence to tradition practiced over, in some cases, thousands of years. The vision surrounding the work is mined directly in the vein of its ancestors, but definitely updated to relate to and comment on current contexts. All of the artists selected work with humor or whimsy, playing with our perceptions and expectations. A sense of continuity and connection can develop from recognizing and understanding the traditions underlying the artwork that we perceive as “contemporary” today. Contextualizing the works in this exhibition in regards to technique, art historic references, and geographic roots can enrich and inform one’s experience.

Rebecca Morgan crafts ceramic face jugs, which have a long tradition in the southern United States, particularly in the Southeast. Originally, they were used by slaves as grave markers to scare away the devil, and also as vessels within which to keep liquor. It was easy to see by looking at the container that it was meant to ward away intruders (and children). Over time, these became almost totems, in a manner of speaking, and family traditions exist where family members were well known makers of certain types of face jugs. Rebecca takes license with this traditional art form and updates it. Her work could represent a marriage between this tradition and Robert Crumb’s work. Growing up in rural Central Pennsylvania, her work is a commentary on some of the people she observed on a regular basis. The comic relief inherent in her work is in direct contrast to the high pressures that society exerts on itself. The artist has indicated that all of the characters she depicts are also self-portraits, whether directly so or otherwise. Despite the imperfections depicted, they exude a blissfulness that is both confident and contented.

The long-standing tradition of stone carving, particularly of marble in Italy, is as well known as the story of art itself. Owing at least in part to the physical durability of stone, there are many extant reminders of the incredible technical skills mastered by the ancient Greeks and later Roman sculptors. They were possessed with an intense interest in pursuing realism while depicting physical perfection in a way which often made it beyond realism. There was such a reverence for the great classic works that there were entire schools in Rome established to teach budding artists how to copy Greek sculptures that were considered worthy of not just emulation, but exact duplication. Venske & Spänle take on this ancient medium. They demonstrate a combination of narrative irreverence coupled with technical virtuosity. These artists have the ability to transform something as solid as a dense stone and make it seem to be fluid and lifelike. Julia Venske and Gregor Spänle originally started working together in 1992. They get their marble from a favorite quarry in Italy and carve it in Germany, and from there it is polished and finished in Brooklyn. It is finished in such a way that the viewer often presumes that the material is synthetic, perhaps resin, for example. Although lifelike, the forms are not anything that has ever existed on this Earth. They
are exobiological constructs, that is, potential alien life forms of an assumed invertebrate nature. This is truly a modern take on a centuries-old tradition.

Op Art has long been connected to Constructivism, Cubism, Dada, and Futurism. It involves using black and white as well as color patterns, lines of varying widths and spacing, dazzle patterns, light and dark spaces, and other optical devices to trick or fool the eye into "seeing" forms, impressions, and curvatures of space, where none are present. The term "Op Art" was coined in the mid-1960s, but the work goes back into the 1930s certainly, perhaps even back into the late 1910s. Many of the works of the Italian Futurists, could be put into this category as well. **Clark Derbes** creates his own form of neo-op work through the use of black + white or color geometric patterning on chainsaw-carved wooden pieces. These works are designed in such a way that the viewer sees dimensionality that is either deceptive or simply nonexistent. They seem to be protruding and/or receding, when in actuality, it is the patterning on a flat surface that is causing the eye to interpret the apparent depth of the form. These tromps clearly display Clark’s understanding of the way that one’s mind interprets these geometric patterns, and like a great close-up magician, he gets the viewer to focus on what he wishes them to perceive.

These are but three of the ten artists whose works comprise this exhibition. As indicated earlier, the works in this show all take a significantly modern slant on artistic tradition(s), much like a song that seems to be reminiscent of something very well known that you just can’t put your finger on. It is something you feel to be familiar, yet it is still original and new.

Mark S. Waskow, Founder/Director, The Waskowmium
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