

Telling Secrets

Codes, Captions and Conundrums in Contemporary Art

October 9, 2009–January 10, 2010

Extended Labels

Dotty Attie (American, b. 1938)

An Adventure at Sea, 1977

Colored pencil on paper

Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay

Attie re-presents details from known works of art in her meticulous drawing style. Together with snippets of text, the images create a suggestive narrative that unfolds like stills from a silent film. Attie specifies nothing, preferring viewers to engage in storytelling. The gaps in the tale force inferences that may surprise or disturb. Viewers are implicated in the resulting narrative, whether it is fantastic, scandalous, or violent.

Frida Baranek (Brazilian, b. 1961)

Untitled, 1991

Iron

Museum purchase: The Lois Pollard Price Acquisition Fund

At a distance, Baranek's sculpture appears fragile and nearly weightless. It recalls natural forms such as birds' nests or tumbleweeds. Up close, the presumed sticks and branches resolve into a tangle of scrap metal weighing ninety pounds. Baranek plays with the contrast between natural and manufactured by appropriating discarded industrial materials. In this way, she encourages consideration of environmentalism and recycling, destruction and creation.

Lee Bontecou (American, b. 1931)

Sixth Stone I, 1964

Lithograph on paper

Museum purchase: Members' Acquisition Fund

Bontecou is best known for her wall sculptures created from canvas stretched over metal armatures. The sculptures frequently have a hole in the center, represented by the black circle in the center of this print. In the post-war period, some critics noted that the voids resemble bomb craters, while others saw them as sexually suggestive. Bontecou sometimes speaks of her imagery in relation to her interest in airplanes and space exploration. She rebuffs categorical descriptions, however, stating that her goal as an artist is to encompass "all freedom in every sense."

Leonora Carrington (British, b. 1917)

Samhain Skin, 1975

Gouache on vellum

Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay

Using an actual animal skin, Carrington invented a relic that references the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced SOW-an). Held on October 31, and celebrating summer's end, it was the precursor to Halloween. Strange human hybrids populate the skin. The mirror-writing, a skill Carrington developed as a child, includes tribes and deities from Gaelic history. Associated with the Surrealists, Carrington often layered alchemical, Celtic, and personal symbols to intrigue and confound.

Cathy de Monchaux (British, b. 1960)

Red, 1999

Brass, copper, velvet, leather, canvas, steel, graphite, and thread

Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, Washington, DC

De Monchaux's sculptures are hybrid forms, simultaneously mechanical and organic, hard and soft, terrifying and seductive, familiar and strange. The sensuality of the materials and the forms they embody evoke human orifices and viscera. They also exude a discomfiting element of the erotic, which is intentional. The title identifies the hue of the concentric rings of velvet. Yet, red is a color loaded with emotional, physiological, and symbolic associations. "I try to give form to the subconscious...I leave it to the viewer to decide what each work is about, at least for them," she says.

Lesley Dill (American, b. 1950)

I Heard a Voice, 2001

Tyvek, paper, thread, and India ink

Museum purchase: Members' Acquisition Fund

Through her art, Dill considers the ways body, language, and the spiritual world intersect. This work relates to a vision the artist had at age fourteen. While looking out her bedroom window at dark leaves against the sky, she says, "I was given to understand the world. I understood that there was a pattern threaded through all things." Dill grounds the work in an autobiographical source, but intends it to speak more universally. Pervaded with symbols related to hearing, touching, the natural, and the spiritual, the artwork invites individual reflection.

Inka Essenhigh (American, b. 1969)

Flush and Aqua, 1999

Screen printing and varnish on paper

Gift of Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz in honor of Susan Fisher Sterling

Influenced by art forms as varied as wallpaper designs, Persian miniatures, and traditional Japanese painting, Essenhigh renders figures that are on the margins of abstraction. Her calligraphic line clearly delineates forms, but her figures never come into focus as recognizable bodies. Essenhigh utilizes an intuitive painting process in which she first applies patches of pigments onto her canvas or paper and then outlines the painted shapes with thin lines to bring the final figure into view.

Maggie Foskett (American, b. 1919)

Do I Know My Own Shadow, 1996

Cliché-verre

Museum purchase: Members' Acquisition Fund

Using a photograph enlarger rather than a camera, Foskett creates collaged images of nature suffused with light. She presents plants and animals at a larger-than-life scale that reveals little-known details of their physical structures and makes them seem unfamiliar and even menacing. In this work, Foskett juxtaposed an x-ray of her own skull with that of an osprey. "The translucent x-ray is like a shadow of things passing through, of things that are transitory," she observes.

Ann Hamilton (American, b. 1956)
untitled (body object series) #8—paddlehead, 1984–1993
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, Washington, DC

This photograph is part of a series of sixteen images that Hamilton created concurrent with her early art installations, which typically focused on bodily sensations. Most of the photographs in the series depict Hamilton interacting with an object in a way that obstructs her sensory abilities and, more provocatively, prevents us from seeing her fully. Through these photographs, Hamilton highlights the limited ability of images (as opposed to direct physical experience) to provide insight or understanding.

Jane Hammond (American, b. 1950)
Untitled (141, 257), 1989
Oil on linen
Gift of Greg Kucera and Larry Yocum

Hammond created this work in response to a negative review of her first solo gallery show. A critic characterized her work as “just more jittery technique from another defensive female painter.” To counter the jibe, Hammond employed verbal and visual signs related to the stereotype of the “lady painter.” For all its relevance to Hammond’s own experience, the work goes beyond the autobiographical. It encourages consideration of assumptions about the female gender—and female artists—broadly.

Jane Hammond (American, b. 1950)
Love Laughs, 2005
Hand-colored lithograph and collage
Promised gift of Steven Scott, Baltimore, in honor of the artist

Hammond is fascinated by the interplay of verbal and visual signs. Here she visualizes nineteen proverbs from around the globe within rooms framed by scaffolding. She interprets the words in the proverbs literally, rather than metaphorically. The yellow cat carrying a mouse down a church nave, for example, illustrates: “Cats don’t catch mice to please God.” Hammond’s approach yields humorous scenes composed of inconsistently scaled objects, animals, architecture, and humans. For all their literal accuracy, her compositions likely bring viewers no closer to understanding the lessons embodied in the proverbs.

Robin Kahn (American, b. 1961)
Victoria’s Secret, 1995
Mixed media on canvas
Gift of Maxine Kahn

Kahn recontextualizes material from art historical sources, historic journals, home economics guides, and textbooks to “evoke the [female] subject’s silenced thoughts and suppressed desires, her powerful humor and long history of labor.” Kahn appropriated the masked, cloaked woman who dominates the foreground from a series of seventeenth-century prints representing the Four Seasons. By partially obscuring some of her found imagery within layers of vellum, Kahn amplifies the overall sense of mystery embodied by the piece.

Hung Liu (American, born China, b. 1948)

Seven Poses, 2005

Mixed media

Gift of the Greater Kansas City Area Committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts

In her paintings and photo-collages, Liu adapts historical photographs of Chinese made by foreign tourists or by Chinese commercial photographers. In *Seven Poses*, she combined photographs of Chinese prostitutes with images of animals and flowers, as well as layers of paint. Through her collage technique, Liu draws attention to that fact that she modifies her photographic source images. Her work demonstrates that once a photograph's background information is lost, it can become a generic (and sometimes misunderstood) sign for a culture.

Deborah Mesa-Pelly (American, b. 1968)

Rosy, 1999

Chromogenic print mounted on aluminum

Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, Washington, DC

Mesa-Pelly photographs stage sets that she constructs within her studio. Like Alice in Wonderland, her female subjects peer through a hole in the wall, climb up a chimney, or kneel at the mouth of a closet-cave, looking intently at strange worlds that lay beyond. With strong lighting and slightly lurid colors, Mesa-Pelly's images have a theatrical sensibility, but the artist notes: "I like that these things could be possible. Keeping them rooted in reality is really important."

Melissa Miller (American, b. 1951)

Broken Wing, 1986

Oil on linen

Partial gift of Laura Lee and Jack S. Blanton; Museum Purchase: The Lois Pollard Price Acquisition Fund

Miller uses animals as metaphors for "human dilemmas and foibles, and the frailties and wonders of life." Birds and beasts personify emotional states, physical experience or, more subtly, environmental concerns. In some works, she includes ghosts and spirits with the living creatures. These ethereal beings allude to transformation and often add a threatening element to the composition. The implied narratives Miller creates compel viewers to wonder what has happened and what will happen beyond the charged moment depicted.

Shirin Neshat (Iranian, b. 1957)

On Guard (Turbulent Series), 1998

Gelatin silver print with ink

Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, Washington, DC

Iranian-born Neshat is a photographer, filmmaker, and video artist based in New York. She explores the tensions between Islamic and Western traditions and values, especially the changing role of women in Iranian culture. Neshat examines complex dichotomies: language and silence, freedom and repression. Here, she inscribed Farsi poetry onto the hands in the photograph. In the West, few will be able to translate the elegant calligraphy; it remains enigmatic surface ornament. Yet, her works are banned from exhibit in her native country, where the text would be understood by most.

Ruby Osorio (American, b. 1974)

The Crescendo, 2005

Mixed media

On loan from the Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, Washington, DC

Osorio explores feminine identity through her paintings of women and girls who seem to have special powers. In *The Crescendo*, many figures' arms have morphed into boat paddles that they use to navigate turbulent seas. Because the women seem not to interact with one another, we do not know whether they exist happily or are in a perilous situation. Meticulously crafted from embroidery and delicate washes of gouache, Osorio's haunting works also challenge conventional notions about the purpose of women's handiwork.

Beverly Pepper (American, b. 1924)

Benet, 1984

Steel with olive wood

Gift of Philip M. Stern, Washington, DC

Pepper often works on a large scale with concrete, steel, or stone. *Benet* is among her most refined works. Its stacked forms allude to African totems and early-twentieth-century European sculpture, both of which Pepper has studied. Although the artist aims to create formally beautiful works that "transcend time," the quirky contours of *Benet* call to mind the aesthetics of the Victorian and Art Deco eras. Some have noted that the sculpture resembles a bellows, spindle, musical instrument, vase, or chess piece.

Alison Saar (American, b. 1956)

Snake Man, 1994

Woodcut and lithograph on paper

Gift of Steven Scott, Baltimore, in honor of the artist

Saar's sculptures and prints often reflect her interest in world religions and spirituality. The figure in this print clenches a serpent between his teeth, providing an arresting metaphor for power. Saar explains that the man is an imaginary shaman or gypsy: "He could go between people and stir things up." *Snake Man* is based on Saar's wood sculpture, *Snake Charmer* (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden). The sculpted figure has blue eyes made from inlaid turquoise, but Saar omitted the irises from the eyes of the printed figure, giving him a ghostly quality.

Niki de Saint Phalle (American, born France, 1930–2002)

La question, 1987

Polychrome mirror and ceramic mosaic in artist's frame

Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay

Renowned for her colorful, large-scale sculptures celebrating women and cultural diversity, Saint Phalle focused in the 1980s on creating her *Tarot Garden*, an expansive sculpture park in Italy. She created *La question* while still at work on the garden; the hearts, flowers, and curving vines seen here also appear on the large serpent sculpture in the park. The question mark, a favorite motif of Saint Phalle's, may relate in this context to the tarot's role in divination. It may also signify Saint Phalle's witty refusal to define the meaning of her work.

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (American, b. 1940)
Indian, Indio, Indigenous, 1992
Oil and collage on canvas
Museum purchase: Members' Acquisition Fund

Quick-to-See Smith refers to works like this one as "narrative landscapes." Recontextualizing words and images from a range of sources, she provides viewers with much to decipher. Pictographs, the masthead of a reservation newspaper, a portrait of a chief, map fragments, and other collage elements vie for attention. Taken together these symbols and references create a morality tale about the appropriation of native lands and the injustices native peoples continue to experience in the United States.

Linda Smith (American, b. 1948)
Inside Chance, 2000
Polymer relief and engraving on Somerset Velvet paper, cotton paper, and board
Museum purchase: Members' Acquisition Fund

This artist's book comprises eight small cubes hinged together to make one larger cube. To read the poem by Alberto Ríos that is written in this book, the reader must open and manipulate the cube. Surfaces connect and break away in unexpected ways, rearranging the text in various configurations. Each new arrangement of the cubes conveys a different meaning.

Pamela Spitzmueller (American, b. 1950)
British Museum Memoir, 1997
Small-grid graph paper, colored pencil, ink, copper sheet, and copper wire
Museum purchase: United States Department of Education Fund

Spitzmueller created this book after visiting the British Museum in London. In the museum's library, exhibit cases displayed books from all over the world and many different time periods. The artist wrote a text about her visit and encased it in an ornate and non-malleable metal binding. The inaccessibility of Spitzmueller's text reflects her frustration at being unable to access the books in the library, a conundrum repeated in the presentation of her book here.

Adriana Varejão (Brazilian, b. 1964)
Qualquer Coisa, 1998
Chromogenic print
Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, Washington, DC

Painter, sculptor, and photographer Varejão critiques colonialism and its resulting cultural fusions. She often features fragments of the human body as a powerful metaphor for the impact of colonialism on Brazil's body politic, past and present. *Qualquer Coisa* (literally "anything" or "something") features a vividly decorated hand whose fingers explore a cut in the neutral background. While the slit evokes a wound, the gesture creates spatial ambiguity, suggesting that something lies beyond: unknowable, mysterious, and potentially dangerous.