



Media Contact:
Michelle Cragle, 202-783-7373
mcragle@nmwa.org

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Enigmatic Images Unveiled in *Telling Secrets: Codes, Captions, and Conundrums in Contemporary Art*



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WASHINGTON—With contemporary art, what you see is rarely all you get. Artists today visually and thematically layer abstraction, text, symbols, cultural references, and personal experiences to create meaning and depth in their work. *Telling Secrets: Codes, Captions and Conundrums in Contemporary Art* features 39 paintings, photographs, drawings, sculptures, and prints from NMWA's collection selected to inspire viewers to make multiple interpretations and inscribe their own ideas and experiences onto each work.

Prior to the 20th century, most art aimed to tell familiar stories or reflect everyday life and express accepted social mores. Twentieth-century art movements such as abstraction, performance, and conceptual art fostered a more interpretive role for the viewer. Contemporary artists relish the fact that the “meaning” of works of art is not fixed but rather shaped by each viewer, and create work that intentionally puzzles, contradicts, seduces, and repels. It encourages viewers to engage in perceived

narratives by including recognizable images and legible texts, but it rarely provides all the necessary information to yield a definitive interpretation.

“The museum started out with only 500 works in its collection. In the past decade, the collection has grown to more than 3,000, with an impressive selection of contemporary work that allows us the freedom to create exhibitions with specifically tailored themes,” says Museum Director Susan Fisher Sterling.

The artists in *Telling Secrets* carefully employ techniques to keep their works thematically indeterminate. Some artists use varying levels of abstraction to prevent their art from being overly narrative. Others layer their works with myriad images so that viewers must decide whether to focus on one or attempt to synthesize all. Several artists in the exhibition develop fantasy-based imagery to allude to spirituality, sexuality, or mortality. Others blend text with their pictorial elements to encourage varying interpretations.

The exhibition juxtaposes artwork by artists from around the world, allowing viewers to draw parallels across different cultures. Each artist has her own technique, symbols, and personal experience from which to draw, but they share the common ground of contemporary art’s visual ambiguity and global scope. Leonora Carrington, Jane Hammond, Robin Kahn, Hung Liu, Shirin Neshat, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, and Adriana Varejão are among the 23 featured artists.

Telling Secrets is generously supported by the members of the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

Image Credit: Jane Hammond, *Love Laughs*, 2005; Hand-colored lithograph and collage, 50 3/4 x 33 1/2 in. Promised gift of Steven Scott, Baltimore, in honor of the artist.

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About National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA)

The National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA), founded in 1981 and opened in 1987, is the only museum solely dedicated to celebrating the achievements of women in the visual, performing and literary arts. The museum’s permanent collection features 3,000 works from the 16th century to the present created by more than 800 artists; including Mary Cassatt, Frida Kahlo, Alma Thomas, Lee Krasner, Louise Bourgeois, Chakaia Booker along with special collections of 18th-century silver tableware and botanical prints. The museum also conducts multidisciplinary programs for diverse audiences and maintains a Library and Research Center which is accessible to the public. NMWA is located at 1250 New York Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C., in a landmark building near the White House. It is open Monday–Saturday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m. and Sunday, noon–5 p.m. For information, call 202-783-5000 or visit the museum’s Web site at www.nmwa.org.