

# Telling Secrets

Codes, Captions and Conundrums in Contemporary Art

October 9, 2009—January 10, 2010

## Wall Text

Featuring works made from the 1960s to today, *Telling Secrets* centers on the participatory role of the viewer in contemporary art and the strategies that artists use to encourage multiple interpretations of their work. Prior to the twentieth 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.

The artists in *Telling Secrets* carefully employ techniques to keep their works thematically ambiguous. 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.

Artists today often create painstakingly crafted works, in part because their refined technique lures viewers to the art and encourages their engagement. Painters, printmakers, and book artists render minute detail with virtuosa technique; photographers incorporate evocative, and sometimes startling, color; and sculptors use intriguing materials such as velvet, mosaic, and gleaming metals. Although they are formally alluring, these works ultimately do not expose their creator’s secrets. Instead, they reveal our own powerful associations, memories, and desires.

Unless otherwise noted, all works are from the collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts.