

The New York Times

N.Y. / REGION ARTS | CONNECTICUT

Art and Its Inspiration, Side by Side, at the Aldrich

By SUSAN HODARA | JULY 11, 2015



Nancy Shaver, “Blue Chair as Base” (2015), blue airline chair with “Blue Bat” (2015).

Credit Courtesy of the Artist

Stepping into the Leir Atrium at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, visitors encounter a motley group of objects arranged on a wall and an adjacent platform. There are photographs, a massive cluster of handmade rope and an anthropomorphized banjo with spiky hair. Nearby are a woven basket, a Victorian vase and a yellow plastic toy telephone. Interspersed throughout are Nancy Shaver’s quirky quiltlike assemblages of fabric-wrapped wooden blocks, some mounted on the wall, others perched on metal rods and one attached to a tree stump.

The installation is part of Ms. Shaver’s exhibition, “Reconciliation,” which continues on the museum’s second floor with another assortment of items displayed alongside her works. The show is an examination of hierarchical categorization, artistic influence and how meaning and value are altered by placement and proximity — themes that pervade the Aldrich in its latest semester of shows, “Circumstance.”

“Circumstance” consists of concurrent solo exhibitions by six contemporary artists. The museum commissioned the artists to produce new pieces and asked them to choose other objects and artworks to provide context and reveal their sources of inspiration.

“They each created a different ‘circumstance’ through which to view their work,” said Amy Smith-Stewart, the Aldrich’s curator. “We wanted to show that inspiration comes from all kinds of sources, and we actually put those sources in the galleries.”

For Ms. Shaver, inspiration comes from found objects, particularly fabrics culled from rural thrift shops. Inspiration also comes from the Depression-era photographer Walker Evans and the French modernist artist and textile designer Sonia Delaunay. The presence of Evans’s photographs and Delaunay’s designs in “Reconciliation” underscores the exhibition’s spectrum of aesthetic, economic and cultural references.

A comparable spectrum is evident in B. Wurtz's exhibition, "Four Collections." Three of the gallery's walls are covered with more than 200 colorful aluminum roasting pans and food containers, embossed with patterns that Mr. Wurtz has been painting since 1990. On the fourth wall, selections from the artist's collections of American Brilliant cut glassware, Jasperware ceramics and Danish Krenit bowls are displayed elegantly on a narrow white shelf.

"These are domestic objects that tend to be in middle- and upper-class homes," Ms. Smith-Stewart said, "whereas the pans have no socioeconomic status — they touch everyone." She likened the interplay of the painted pans and the collectibles to that of the chorus and the gods in Greek theater. "But here," she said, "which is the chorus and which are the gods?"

A plaster cast of the head of the Greek goddess Iris, from the marble original at the Acropolis, graces the entrance to Ruby Sky Stiler's "Ghost Versions." The exhibition presents two new pieces by Ms. Stiler, wall-scale reliefs made of Hydrocal plaster. Their repetitive patterns echo the motifs in an accompanying display of classical plaster casts lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Bellarmine Museum of Art: torsos and busts, drapery, architectural fragments. Ms. Stiler's 21st-century wall reliefs, made from castoff materials in her studio, evoke diverse artistic associations, including Henri Matisse's cutouts, Louise Nevelson's constructions and Native American pottery. Their juxtaposition with reproductions of ancient sculptures raises questions about the nature of authenticity and authorship, and the permeable boundary between kitsch and art.

The other shows are equally provocative. Penelope Umbrico's exhibition, "Shallow Sun," explores the vanishing role of natural light in the digital age. For her installation "Sun Screen (Camera Obscura)," the artist substituted a projection of images of the sun found online for the light entering the museum's camera obscura. Installations in the neighboring Opatrny Gallery use photographs, videos, monitors and cables to comment on the encroachment of digital technology on all things analog.

In "Flower Mutations," Virginia Poundstone considers the socioeconomic significance of the flower and its representation in art and design. Her sculpture "Quilt Square (Tulip)" rests in the museum's outdoor courtyard, its slotted glass, stone and metal panels alluding to Giacomo Balla's painted wood "Futurist Flowers," three of which are on view inside. Flower-based works by other artists, including Christo, Nancy Graves and Andy Warhol, share the space. Outside, Ms. Poundstone planted an earthwork of 3,000 tulips that blossomed into a glorious but fleeting garden.

In her ceramics, Elif Uras blends traditional Eastern abstract patterning with Western figuration to address gender roles in Turkey today. Her exhibition, "Nicaea," fills the Screening Room with pieces created in Iznik (formerly Nicaea), a Turkish town renowned for its ceramics production during the Ottoman Empire. Ms. Uras's vases suggest the female body; her platters are adorned with contemporary scenes of women at work. In the center of the gallery, a breast-shaped fountain on a tiled platform spouts water over images of women surrounded by a swirling sea. "Nicaea" also includes an intricately decorated 16th-century Iznik plate. Of Ms. Uras, Ms. Smith-Stewart said, "She's taken the tradition and turned it on its side."

To encourage public engagement, the curators have invited residents of Fairfield, Litchfield, New Haven, Westchester and Putnam Counties in Connecticut and New York to submit proposals for "In Context With Our Community." This series of four-week exhibitions in the first-floor Small Space gallery pairs a work by one of the "Circumstance" artists with a responding display conceived by a community member.

“We wanted to put out the concept we devised as curators to see what others would come up with,” Ms. Smith-Stewart said.

They also wanted to activate museumgoers’ connections with each “Circumstance” show. “We hope they will question what they see,” Ms. Smith-Stewart said. “What am I looking at? Who made it? Where is the artist’s voice? Why is it in the museum?”

In a broad sense, the museum itself provides the context, the circumstance, for all of the works on view. “The way you present objects — where you present them — gives them meaning,” Richard Klein, the Aldrich’s exhibitions director, said. “You might think an art museum is a neutral space, but it isn’t. There is no such thing as a neutral space. Where you see something is going to alter your impression of it.”

The six “Circumstance” exhibitions run through Oct. 25 at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield. For more information: 203-438-4519 or aldrichart.org. For details about “In Context With Our Community”: aldrichart.org/opportunities/publicproject.php.

A version of this article appears in print on July 12, 2015, on page CT8 of the New York edition with the headline: Art and Its Inspiration, Side by Side. Order Reprints! Today's Paper!Subscribe