

Nestled in the hills of Bennington, Vt., the Bennington Museum was founded in 1852, originally as an historical association. In the 1920s, the museum began acquiring portraits, pottery and landscape paintings and became the largest public repository of the works of folk artist Grandma Moses. Through recent acquisitions of the works of Gayleen Aiken, Jessica Park, Larry Bissonnette, Paul Humphrey and Ray Materson, the museum is now actively collecting in the area of grassroots and self-taught art. It has initiated such innovative exhibitions

traditional craft and modern design; and among itinerant portrait painters, village craftsmen and self-taught outsiders whose originality and visionary imagination have inspired many insider artists and patrons.

Wolterstorff calls such disparate juxtapositions “creative collisions” where “a new, holistic sense of creativity emerges.” And he adds: “It’s like rubbing two different materials together to see what will happen. Sometimes sparks fly, and it’s these sparks that inspire new creativity, ignite new invention. The mash-up is the quintessential new art form of our age. Out of the unruly jostling

Creative Collisions at the Bennington Museum: “Inward Adorings of the Mind”

BY TONY GENGARELLY

“A museum can’t just be about old art by dead artists. It’s got to be about the present, and inspire the future.”

– Robert Wolterstorff

as *Alice Neel/Erastus Salisbury Field*, which received recognition from the *Wall Street Journal* as one of the nine most memorable exhibitions of 2014. As a result, the museum has edged its history-based collection into the mainstream of contemporary, outsider and self-taught art.

According to Bennington Museum Director Robert Wolterstorff, “A museum can’t just be about old art by dead artists. It’s got to be about the present, and inspire the future. It’s that conviction that has been driving all the recent changes at the Bennington Museum and has led to its new energy and new vision.”

This vision includes a lively dialogue between past and present; between

of different things, the new emerges.”

Museum Curator Jamie Franklin has taken this message into the museum’s recent exhibitions. From July 3 to November 1, 2015, the museum’s principal exhibition, *Inward Adorings of the Mind: Grassroots Art from the Bennington Museum and Blasdel/Koch Collections*, featured more than 150 pieces of folk, self-taught and outsider art arranged in four thematic clusters that highlighted the diversity and power of the creative process through different lenses and historical moments: *History, Memory and Memorials; Signs and Symbols/Words and Images; Faces: Fact and Fiction; and Everyday Beauty: Whimsy and Utility*.

According to Franklin, “Drawing on the Bennington Museum’s renowned collection of historic folk art, augmented by recent acquisitions of work by modern and contemporary self-taught artists from our region, and the private collection of grassroots art gathered together over the last 50 years by Gregg Blasdel and Jennifer Koch of Burlington, Vt., this exhibition highlighted thematic dialogues among extraordinary artworks created by everyday people from the 18th century to the present day.”

One wonders if we are ready to receive such creative diversity. Is there, as Franklin suggests, a dialogue among such original works of art from different times and circumstance? What “creative sparks” can we discern? Did the

▼ Mt. Sir Douglas of Rocky Mtn Range near Town of Turner Valley Alberta Proviance Canada, 1964, by Joseph Yoakum.



exhibition indeed realize some of Walt Whitman's declaration that introduced the show: "I reject none, accept all, then reproduce all in my own forms."

By citing just a few examples from the many objects that were shown, these questions, I believe, can be answered with a resounding "Yes!"

The section on *History, Memory and Memorials* juxtaposed paintings of Bennington historical subjects by Grandma Moses, traditional mourning pictures, a sampler depicting family history, Joseph Yoakum's memory landscapes and an old farmhouse filled with recollections of family life, rendered by Gayleen Aiken. Stephen Warren's imposing 1894 *Memory Ware Tower* was a powerful statement; its multitude of inlaid memorabilia spiraling upward suggested a classical victory column. What these varied artistic descriptions of the past might have been telling or not telling us is suggested by Emily Dickinson's words that introduced the section: "But are not all facts dreams as soon as we put them behind us."

This display considered the art as a meditation on the ephemeral nature of existence and what traces we leave behind. To recognize one piece in relation to the other also informed as to how the past was built from fragments and molded by time. The individual creations from ordinary life experience made a record for the future, and

accordingly, each touched the viewer in a profound way.

Faces: Fact and Fiction introduced a tantalizing set of images ranging from the compressed energy of a Larry Bissonnette caricature to the itinerant artist's approximation of traditional portrait styles: combinations of fact with stylized props and attributes fashionable for the times. Gayleen Aiken's imaginary family (The Raimbilli Cousins) gathered around the nickelodeon or at home in joyous union played out a personal fantasy. Inez Nathaniel Walker's "Bad Girls" and the "Flim-Flam Lady" of Mose Tolliver explored with humor a shadowy side of the feminine mystique. Some, like Paul Humphrey's "Sleeping Beauties" diverged from the portrait tradition altogether. With their fabrication from a magazine original and repetition with variations in multiple sets, his series of somnolent women were reminiscent of the style of Andy Warhol. Outside the conventions of naturalistic rendering these artists were free to conceptualize, personalize, invent and dream.

By bringing artist/collectors and educators together with living artists and their works, the museum staff hoped to guide the community to an appreciation of how art inspires invention; how one artist affects another; and how the collector/patron influences the mix.



Photographs courtesy Bennington Museum.



- ▲ *Memory Ware Tower*, 1894 by Stephen C. Warren
- ◀ *Some Raimbilli Cousins Dance Around a Nickelodeon (Music Box)*, c. 1985, by Gayleen Aiken
- ▼ *Flim-Flam Lady*, c. 1995, by Mose Tolliver.





Blue Shelf, from the Collection of Gregg Blasdel and Jennifer Koch.

A major portion of the exhibition contained a variety of everyday objects transformed by the artful insertion of imaginative whimsy. Walking sticks sported elaborate hand grips (decorative impulses that defy the canes' utility), water jugs glared with mask-like faces, a row of wooden carvings presented a number of fantasy figures based on everyday people and animals.

Here, the Blasdel/Koch collection

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was well represented. Both of these artist/patrons have a long history of acquiring grassroots art. Its originality and uniqueness inspire and inform their own creative processes. Blasdel, an Associate Professor of Art at Saint Michael's College in Colchester, Vt., coined the term "grassroots art" in a 1968 article for *Art in America* while introducing a number of then-unknown American artists—"self-taught makers who created sophisticated, all-encompassing environmental installations beyond the boundaries of . . . art schools, galleries and museums," Franklin added. [In 1992,

Blasdel was one of the symposium speakers at the Folk Art Society's conference in Los Angeles.]

The transformation of objects continued with a display that included an early work (1986) of visionary artist Jessica Park as compared to Ray Materson's miniature tapestries. Park's

Ski Vermont, 2014, by Ray Materson.



enthusiasm for mechanical gadgetry was expressed with a rainbow-colored quartz heater. This early example of compatible hues has become a hallmark of Park's art. In contrast to Park's playful vision, Ray Materson's miniature woven tapestries (3 x 2 ½ inches in size) focused on drug addiction and the poverty on which it feeds. Materson's early life led to a prison sentence; he was convicted for stealing in order to support a cocaine

addiction. In prison, he learned to weave small images using thread from unraveled socks. One of his miniatures in the show, *Ski VT*, resembled a poster where syringes form a V and a T for the lettering, thus drawing attention to the contrast between Vermont's popular public image and the realities of its drug problem.

Inward Adorings illustrated yet another stated goal of the Bennington Museum, that of "connector." By bringing artist/collectors and educators together with living artists and their works, the museum staff hoped to guide the community to an appreciation of how art inspires invention; how one artist affects another; and how the collector/patron influences the mix. In this way, the public is invited to participate in the dissemination and direction of art.

In Wolterstorff's words: "Formerly, a museum's role was to watch the great current of life pass by, and occasionally pluck from the stream a significant object to collect, exhibit and preserve. Now we will take a more active role. We will divert the stream. What I am talking about is a new sense of responsibility—a responsibility not only to support our community, but to help mold it." ❏

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