

'Lyric Visions': UMCA exhibit shows breadth of UMass faculty artwork



CAROL LOLLIS
"Trees, Bags" by Shona MacDonald



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Here's the challenge: Put together a thematically and visually cohesive art exhibit, featuring the diverse work of artists who work in an array of mediums, who come from varied backgrounds, whose ages span decades, and who each has a distinctive style.

Accepting that challenge: Lorne Falk, a Five College visiting associate professor of contemporary art and the guest curator of "Lyric Visions," an exhibit of work created by 13 members of the faculty at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The show is on view through May 3 at the University Museum of Contemporary Art.

"There is roughly three generations of artists," Falk said in a recent interview at the museum. "The notion that there would be anything in common is almost impossible."

Nevertheless, Falk says, he did find commonality among the works that include painting, works on paper, sculpture, video and installations. There's also interactive multi-media, such as "Labyrinth of Fables," a computer-animated, interactive tour of a 17th-century garden at the Palace of Versailles in France, created by Copper Giloth and Jonathan Tanant and shown on a Mac desktop computer.

In the end, Falk says, all the works adhere to the form of a lyric essay, combining qualities of research, memoir, poetry and narrative writing. Physically, he added, the works all embody a rhizomatous shape — the tangled shape taken by roots of some plants.

"Structurally, a rhizome has no beginning or end," Falk writes in his curatorial essay. "It is in a constant state of becoming, its connective web of fibers fanning out in all directions."

Finally, Falk says, each work lacks a view of a clear horizon — both thematically and physically.

"The horizon line is mostly ... missing," he writes. "The perspective that is favored is vertical and vertiginous. Your eyes experience a kind of free fall that has not bottom."

Tangled lines

"In our time of digital communication and technology, what we all seem to share is a sense of disorientation, not a lot of horizon," Falk said.

Jenny Vogel, for example, embodies that sensibility with her installation, "Before Our Eternal Silence," shown in an enclosed room in the gallery. It features blinking lamps and an eerie audio track playing from wall-mounted loud speakers. At the entrance to the room are two tables covered with lamps that click on and off together, but in a seemingly random pattern. The design of each lamp is different and each looks as if it could have been picked up from a knickknack shop or flea market — like the Winnie the Pooh-inspired honey jar lamp, or the glass lamp filled with shells. In keeping with the concept of disorientation, the lamps' power cords drip from the table, rhizome-like, in a tangle.

On the audio track, distorted modern symphonic music and a woman's voice monotonously speaking about loved ones she misses are punctuated periodically by beeping Morse code.

The concept of the lyric essay is embodied in the poetry of the woman's memoir. The tie into research, Falk says, is the association between the light bulb and the Morse code. These, he says, were contemporary inventions, developed at the advent of the modern, oftentimes disorienting age.

Visual twists

Shona Macdonald's oil-on-canvas paintings are equally aligned with the exhibit's themes. The five paintings included are landscapes, but with subtle visual twists to disorient the vision.

"Sky on Ground #1" and "Sky on Ground #2" are paintings of puddles. Each depicts a mirror image of a sky that's out of frame, creating a mysterious reflection of something that isn't visible to the viewer. Rhizomatous shapes are visible in the placement of the paint and, in the case of "Sky on Ground #2," the reflection of a tree's interwoven branches.

"Trees, Bags," another landscape, shows a bend in a road lined with trees that are in bags, waiting to be planted. The sky is flat, gray and overcast and the horizon is out of focus. There is a sense of blurred motion, as if the view is seen from a moving car.

In a question-and-answer session held last week at the gallery, Macdonald explained that her landscapes are man-made, despite the greenery, because of the objects she places in them, such as traffic cones and roads. Her aim, she said, is to "present something that is overlooked" — places that people might see any day, but never fully process.

Alexis Kuhr's seven untitled works on view tell a story about the three-year period during which she created them, while recovering from surgery. All are ink abstracts, reproduced after making the originals using a drawing application on an iPad.

Although they were made in a time when the artist had limited mobility, each communicates a kinetic energy, inspired, she says, by music and dance. The lines may seem arbitrarily placed as they don't take any definite recognizable shape, but they still convey a perceivable third dimension within them. The pieces also suggest a rhizome shape as the black lines merge, seemingly randomly, on the page.

"BFAMFAPhD" is the title of a collaboration among Susan Jahoda, Blair Murphy and Caroline Woolard — an essay and artwork put into a multimedia platform, which riffs on the notion that the cost of getting an art degree may not be supported by employment opportunities after graduation.

The exhibit's other artists are Michael Coblyn, Jeanette Cole, Patricia Galvis y Assmus, Benjamin Jones, Jerry Kearns, Nancy Lapointe, Robin Mandel and Young Min Moon. Although the pieces by all 13 artists stand alone visually — the array of mediums and genres contribute to a sense of disorientation — they also lend themselves well to Falk's thematic vision. Even so, the shared thematic similarities are perhaps not evident without further examination — as if they meet on a blurred horizon.

"Lyric Visions" will be on view through May 3 at the UMCA in the Fine Arts Center, 151 President's Drive on the UMass campus in Amherst. Museum hours are Tuesdays through Fridays from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays from 2 to 5 p.m. For information, visit umass.edu/umca.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF UMCA
Jenny Vogel sets up lamps for her installation at the University Museum of Contemporary Art.



CAROL LOLLIS
"This land Is Your Land (or a ten-year history of the US economy rendered as an Arctic wasteland), made in 2013 by Benjamin Jones, using plywood, epoxy and lacquer