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O'Keefe, cage and Artists in Cellophane were among artists represented in this year's most outstanding Triad Art Shows

BY TOM PATTERSON, SPECIAL COPRESPONDENT, 23 DEC. 2017



Several of this year's most outstanding art shows in Winston-Salem highlighted relationships between visual art and other disciplines, including fashion, music and evidentiary documentation. At the top of that list is "Georgia O'Keefe: Living Modern" an illuminating exhibition at Reynolda House from late summer into the fall. It celebrated one of the 20th century's best known American artists by showing how her visual creativity extended to all aspects of her life, especially her public image. The exhibition brought together 180 objects, including 38 paintings and other works from all periods of O'Keefe's career. Its most distinctive feature was its selection of dresses, capes, kimonos and work clothes from O'Keefe's wardrobe.

Visual art's relationship to music was explored last winter and spring in an unusual two-part exhibition at Wake Forest University's Hanes Gallery and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art. "SoundSeen: Cage / Braxton / Marclay" brought together unconventional musical scores, recordings and other works related to recorded sound by John Cage, Christian Marclay and Anthony Braxton, world-renowned leaders in radical creative experimentation. The elder among this trio is Cage (1912-1992), the avant-garde music pioneer whose innovative compositions required him to devise new approaches to musical notation, yielding scores that sometimes look more like abstract drawings. His early work with sound-recording tape was a reference point for Marclay's "Taped Tapes," a series of untitled pieces made from unspooled magnetic tape attached to sheets of paper. Braxton is a composer and musician rooted in avant-garde jazz. Beginning in the 1980s he began to incorporate visual elements into his increasingly complex titles and musical scores, including drawings, illustrations, collaged photo reproductions and articles clipped from newspapers and magazines. His visually enlivened titles and scores were the most striking works in both exhibitions.

SECCA was also the site of three other noteworthy exhibitions this year, including "20 Years of Art-o-Mat." The latter show celebrated local artist Clark Whittington's genius idea of converting old cigarette-vending machines into dispensaries for inexpensively priced, miniature-scaled artworks. Because these pieces are wrapped in cellophane, in the manner of cigarette packs, Whittington dubbed his network of suppliers "Artists in Cellophane." He used his marketing skills to place individually customized Art-o-mats in libraries, galleries, art-museum gift shops and other venues across the country. Art-o-mat's idiosyncratic, locally grounded history was aptly reflected in the SECCA exhibition, which included 14 of the converted machines, several hundred of the small works artists have made for the machines, and other components exemplifying Whittington's retro graphic style. Also worthy of special mention were SECCA's solo exhibitions by Taha Heydari and Robyn O'Neil. Heydari is an Iranian-American artist who ingeniously turns the traditional medium of painting into a critical lens on timely issues with international

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implications. His paintings are based on digital imagery, usually in varied states of pixilation and degradation. In some cases he throws in traditional Islamic design motifs, computer-generated patterns, linear screen grids and painterly brushstrokes. His visually engaging, thematically charged exhibition was titled "Subliminal," alluding to visual and/or auditory stimuli that recipients perceive without being consciously aware of them.

O'Neil's exhibition titled "Something Vanished Over Paradise" — on view through Jan. 7 of next year — reveals her as a meticulous draftsman with a dark vision that carries something of a silver lining. Her fine-point pencil drawings depict a psychological wasteland of vast plains, dark expanses of water and inhospitably jagged-edged mountains. All of her human figures are men, each with distinct facial features but all identically dressed in dark sweatsuits and athletic shoes. Wandering aimlessly, lying on the ground, drowning or interacting with each other — sometimes violently — they appear to have been involuntarily exiled to these bleak, hostile-looking environments. The apocalyptic scenario that visually unfolds in these drawings suggests an impending end to the human race, since women have evidently gone extinct or been forcibly eliminated. O'Neil's most recent drawings — topographically dramatic, imaginary landscapes with touches of color — appear to represent the emergence of a new world with no human inhabitants to spoil it. This year's roster of exhibitions at SECCA is the last to reflect the influence of Cora Fisher, the center's curator of contemporary art since October 2013. She resigned as of March 1 and returned with her husband and their young son to her native New York, where she planned to continue her work as a writer and curator. SECCA has yet to appoint her successor. Winston-Salem State University's art collection is one of the major assets of an institution that celebrated its 125th anniversary this year. To help mark that occasion the university's Diggs Gallery showcased some of the collection's most prized pieces in a long-running exhibition titled "Origins: The Historical Legacy of Visual Art at Winston-Salem State University."

Endia Beal, gallery director, chose to spotlight 12 of the collection's artists whose lives trace a historical arc across the 20th century and into the 21st. The show's elder figure Selma Burke, born in 1900 in Mooresville, went on to develop an international reputation as a sculptor. Other North Carolina natives represented in the show were Romare Bearden (1911-1988), Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012), John Biggers (1924-2001) and Beverly Buchanan (1940-2015) as well as local artists Francis "Sonny" Brown and Glenda Wharton, born after World War II. In Tyler Starr's "Redress Papers," a small but thought-provoking show at the Delta Arts Center, images of vintage cars were the focal point for a sobering lesson in recent American history. Starr examined declassified FBI documents about racist violence in the South during the 1960s to find the information underlying his show, including most of the black-and-white photos he reprinted. These crime-scene images of damaged cars whose black owners were driving when they were murdered emphasize the brutality of these events and the mentality that motivated them. Accompanying texts explained that these murders remain unsolved, although the primary suspects in each case are white citizens known for their racist views. The Japanese horror-film images Starr juxtaposed with these evidentiary photo-documents serve as metaphors for the extreme racial prejudice that remains deeply rooted in the American South. His was the first show in the Delta Arts Center's People's Gallery, a newly designated space for showing art intended as a social catalyst.

Image: Georgia O'Keefe, Ram's Head, White Hollyhock – Hills, 1935, Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.