

UNIQUE & WIDELY DIVERGENT

THE GRIFFIN BRINGS THOUGHT-PROVOKING WONDER BACK TO PHOTOGRAPHY



A woman in a torn gauze dress crouches at center, holding an axe.

Around her, the room is a clutter of objects: A flock of birds flying out of a hole in the floor and roosting on the limbs of a tree emerging from the colorful fleur de lis wallpaper; a tiny rocking horse; a rabbit; a birdcage; an overturned chair; a hornet's nest; candles, tattered books with broken bindings, animal horns, clumps of dug-up roots.

Dorothy O'Connor's photograph "Passage" is rich with details; the eye is drawn everywhere, almost all at once.

It is indicative of the thought-provoking, unique—and, perhaps most notably, widely divergent—work selected for the 27th Juried Members' Exhibition at the Griffin Museum of Photography. Nearly 60 artists appear in the show, which is on view at the Winchester, Massachusetts, gallery July 15 through August 29.

The included images, culled from hundreds, are at turns beautiful, frightening, surreal, starkly realistic, social, sensuous.

Take Robert Johnson's "Xina"—a dark-haired, porcelain-skinned woman stares out solemnly, shirt billowed open to expose her clavicle and décolletage. In teasing fashion, the frame ends just at the slope of her left breast.

Similarly, Joan Lobis Brown's untitled piece depicts a hint of a woman's shadow on the wall of a room in muted sunlight: all the viewer sees is one of her breasts, her posed arm, wavy hair, and the subtle curve of her stomach before it disappears out of frame.

Ralph Mercer's "Rayanne's Dream" has a similar willowy and ethereal feel. In the black-and-white image, a fair-skinned woman swirls in a liquid atmosphere. She holds her hand, palm out, against her face, eyes closed, calm, serene.

A black-and-white artist—the medium is "an abstraction, a distillation of the real world" that eliminates the distraction of color—Mercer is inspired by nature and the female form, juxtaposing and merging them in his work. "She is in nature, of nature, and

REVIEW

27TH ANNUAL JURIED MEMBERS' EXHIBITION

GRIFFIN MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHY

67 SHORE ROAD
WINCHESTER,
MASSACHUSETTS

JULY 15 THROUGH
AUGUST 29

Dorothy O'Connor, *Passage*, 2017.

inseparable from it," he said of Rayanne. "As in a dream, possibilities are infinite and the human spirit is immersed in the world."

He added: "I am profoundly moved by the human form and seek to express the beauty, spirit, movement, mystery, and transformation of humanity in nature through depictions of the woman symbolizing nature and unity."

O'Connor, much like Mercer, finds inspiration in nature. "Passage" came about after she saw a flock of red-winged blackbirds in sharp and dark shadow; it was a "brief but

concealed by a black umbrella; abandoned rooms and decaying mental hospitals embraced by ivy; landscapes, seascapes, portraits, floral studies, and images playing with shadow, light, movement and time, sometimes layering it over itself.

Aline Smithson's "Fugue State, Part 2, #12" is one example of the latter. The director's prize winner features the silhouette of a man contrasted by multi-colored bands; three of the bands also depict skin, hair and an emerald green eye staring out at the viewer.

LEFT: Aline Smithson, *Fugue State, Part 2, #12*.

CENTER: Joyce Wilson, *I'll Try to Fix You*.

RIGHT: Robert Johnson, *Xina*, 2019.



glorious and impressionable sight," and she later dreamt that those birds were flying out of a hole in the floor.

The lively barrage of items in her photographs are often natural ephemera collected on daily walks with her dogs. Much of it simply comes together naturally, she said, but there is some symbolism and meaning – in "Passage," such as the rabbit (a nod to the Kit Williams book "Masquerade") and the hornet's nest (which she "stalks" and collects).

"The fact that these beautiful natural feats just disintegrate after their keepers pass always seemed kind of sad to me," she explained. "Also, the fact that the hornets create what essentially starts as a nest and in one season becomes a tomb strikes me as profound."

Other evocative and provocative images in the show tackle social and racial injustice. This includes Janet Milhomme's "Forces Within," a portrait of a young African American boy, cracked and flaking like paint on an abandoned wall; and Joyce Wilson's "I'll Try to Fix You," with those very words graffitied over the face of a young Black Muslim girl.

There are also textural studies such as close-ups of plush, candy-red car interiors; candid shots such as a lone farmer draped in morning fog, or a funeral attendee

As the artist explained, her "Fugue State" series materialized after she lost a hard drive holding 20 years of analog scans. Half of them were recovered, and the rest corrupted, each in "totally unique" ways because of how the machine damaged and reinterpreted the pixels.

As she put it, rather than "let the machine have the last word," she cyanotypes silhouettes of portraits over the damaged scans.

"I am excited about the potential of 'failure,' of making art out of destruction and creating something that is thought provoking," she said. Some art such as photography, she added, is losing its tangibility, and may cease to exist in the future. "I am hoping that viewers will deeply consider the preservation and legacy of their own family photographs," she said, "inspiring them to create prints that can be passed down through the generations."

Rebecca Sexton Larson also explores interior and exterior abstraction.

In the sepia "Every Picture Tells a Story," an ornately framed image hangs on a 100-year-old, massively-trunked oak tree. Viewers must duck in close to make out the details therein: A country dirt road lined with rock walls, thatched-roof houses, and trees. Also, something

travels on the road – but exactly what is hard to tell.

The piece is also one of a series, “How to Catch a Man-Made Cloud,” created during a dark period when Sexton Larson cared for her aging parents. “My interest was in developing poignant short stories that challenge the relationship between perception and imagination,” she said. “Each photograph in the series illustrated a non-existent landscape reflective of the isolation and loneliness I was experiencing.”

Donna Tramontozzi’s “Through the Mist” is a more whimsical study: The striking composite of three images depicts a young boy staring at a graceful giraffe seated on a disintegrating divan. There seems little separating the two in the decaying room with punctured walls and rolling-off wallpaper.

“There is nothing more awe-inspiring than the natural world around us,” Tramontozzi said. “What else do you need besides nature? I’m always after wonder in my work.”

Wonder: A common thread throughout the cerebral, intriguing Griffin show.

Taryn Plumb

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