

# A study in contrasts: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum offers diverse fall exhibits

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With two new exhibits this fall, the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum has offered quite a contrast between light and dark, large and small, colorful and somber. In adjoining galleries, no less.

The large and colorful show belongs to Judy Pfaff, an internationally known American artist who's made her name in particular with big installations: vibrant, hybrid forms that fall somewhere between sculpture and conceptual art, with color and varied materials at the heart of the work. The exhibit, which concentrates on a period between 1985 and 1992, when Pfaff began experimenting with these forms, is aptly named "betwixt."



In a facing gallery, meanwhile, the museum is featuring "Energies and Elegies," a mix of mostly black-and-white photographs, etchings, prints and engravings that explore the ideas of change and renewal — the basic principle of physics that energy is neither created or destroyed but rather transformed from one state to another.

That exhibit, drawn largely from the museum's holdings, includes the work of a diverse group of photographers including Ansel Adams, Sally Mann and Jerome Liebling, as well as print artist Julie Mehretu and others.

"Many of the works have an elegiac quality to them," Hannah Blunt, the exhibit curator, said earlier this fall about the show. "You get a sense of the power of objects that are in transition or that represent death or loss."

"Energies and Elegies" runs through Dec. 2 at the museum; "betwixt" will be on display through Dec. 20.

## 'betwixt'

Walking into a gallery of Judy Pfaff's installations is a bit like suddenly finding yourself at a carnival or amusement park. There's an explosion of color and a sense you've been transported to an elaborate fun house — one with a sense of movement because there's so much going on. In fact, it can be hard for the eye to focus on a particular aspect of any of the structures since there's too much to take in at a glance.

In “Wallabout,” for instance, Pfaff has fashioned a jumble of joined shapes — rectangles, circles, elongated cubes, a trapezoid, starbursts, a partial grid — from plywood, balsa wood and steel. It’s all painted in abstract patterns and wild colors that compete for attention, like a 3-dimensional work of op art. There’s an almost gleeful sense of improvisation at work.

Like most of the other designs on display in the show, “Wallabout,” from 1986, falls somewhere between a sculpture and a wall hanging. It’s attached to the wall, about two feet off the ground, with one side extending across a corner of the room.

A bit further on is “Barcelona,” from 1990, which at first glance suggests some sort of cosmic explosion. In this, the largest piece in the exhibit, Pfaff has fused steel, plastic, wire and glass in a way that suggests various objects are hurtling through the air. Big objects, too, like patio furniture — chairs and round-topped tables, again painted in bright colors.

Like “Wallabout,” “Barcelona” is bolted to the wall and stands close to 20 feet high; part of it, jutting out about 12 feet, rests on the floor

Pfaff, who was born in Great Britain but grew up partly in the United States, also makes prints, drawings and sculpture. Now an art professor at Bard College in New York, she became best known for her experimental installations — one reviewer dubbed them examples of “planned chaos” — and has won several awards over the years, including a 2004 MacArthur “Genius Grant” and a lifetime achievement award from the International Sculpture Center in New Jersey.

The Mount Holyoke exhibit includes a few of Pfaff’s more “low-key” works, like colored woodcuts and prints, as well as a few installations in which she concentrates on form rather than color. “Los Voces,” from 1992, a maze of steel and aluminum (some of it lacquered), includes dense thickets of wire, as well as steel rods connected by thin tendrils of that same wire, like giant cobwebs; one section suggests a broken umbrella.

The New York Times, which calls Pfaff a pioneer of site-specific art, once wrote that she had a remarkable ability to get seemingly disparate elements “to hang together and develop on one another. She seems somehow to get order and disorder working for her at the same time.” That seems just right.

## **‘Energies and Elegies’**

Stepping from “betwixt” into “Energies and Elegies,” in the adjacent gallery, is a bit like changing from color TV to a black-and-white set.

Most of the exhibit is made up of black-and-white photographs, or of subjects in somber hues, like a color photo of the charred pages of a partially burned book. There’s an etching of the body of a falcon lying in the snow, a photo of a dead tree in a Southwestern desert, and a sculpture made from burned wood.

But there’s plenty of vibrancy here, too, a sense of the natural rhythms of life and the inevitability of change. In several photographs by Ansel Adams, the focus is not the grandeur of the Sierra Nevada or the wide-open spaces of the West but the constant

change in the natural world. In “Rushing Water,” from 1963, Adams photographed a section of the Merced River in the Sierras in which water foams against boulders and the skeletal remains of a tree trunk that’s fallen into the river.

Another photo shows the gnarled contours of a dead tree at Sunset Crater National Monument in Arizona. A third, “Siesta Lake,” offers an intimate scene from Yosemite National Park, in which a partially submerged tree trunk lies in a corner of a small, dark lake. In the foreground, the water is brightened by the reflected sky.

Rosamond Wolff Purcell, also a U.S. photographer, has long taken images of old, forgotten objects — including old books — in a way that allows the subject to assume a new identity. The Mount Holyoke exhibit includes two examples. In “Dante’s Inferno,” she depicts a partly burned copy of, well, “Inferno” by the medieval Italian poet; the charred pages take on a mysterious texture all their own.

And in “Book Nest,” a moldy, leather-bound book that looks positively ancient is covered in old leaves, dried grass and bits of torn paper. It might well be a modern-day nest for insects.

The work of Ethiopian-American artist Julie Mehretu adds a splash of color and energy to the show. Her five prints, from a series called “Landscape Allegories,” hum with a kaleidoscope of abstract images from which swirling clouds, windswept foliage, rays of sunlight and other natural effects can be deduced, though the prints are certainly open to other interpretations.

Perhaps the most arresting image from the exhibit is a 1989 photo by the late Jerome Liebling, the architect of the film and photography department at Hampshire College. In “Emily’s White Dress,” one of Emily Dickinson’s frocks is visible inside its glass display case at the Dickinson Museum in Amherst — except where it’s not.

Toward its top, part of the dress becomes mysteriously transparent, allowing a window and hazy outdoor light behind it to be seen.

Death, life, decay and renewal, stasis and metamorphosis: they’re all in the mix in a show in which, as exhibit notes put it, “everything old becomes new again.”

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Along with “betwixt” and “Energies and Elegies,” the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum is currently showing “Mel Bochner: Illustrating Philosophy,” a series of prints Bochner created to illustrate the ideas of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). All visits to the museum are free. For hours and additional information, visit [www.mtholyoke.edu/artmuseum](http://www.mtholyoke.edu/artmuseum).

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