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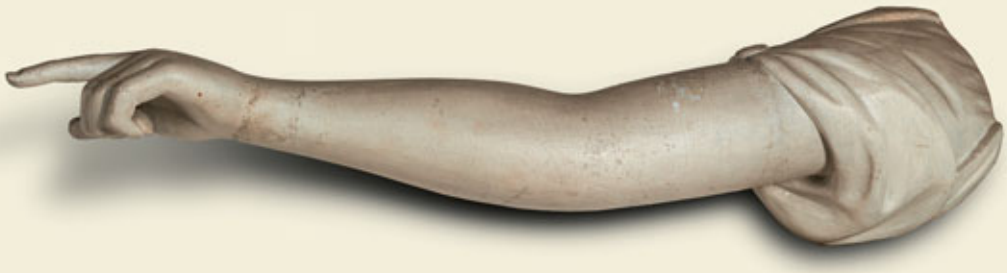
2018–2019

Exhibitions



Promise of the Infinite: Joan Jonas and the Mirror
July 17, 2018–June 16, 2019

Joan Jonas '58 has been called a pioneer, a defier of categories, and the "Mother of all Performance Art." This focused exhibition—the first of the artist's at her alma mater—brings together four works that span Jonas's prolific career to explore an important leitmotif: the mirror. From an early performance captured on 16mm film, to a recent installation piece, Jonas uses the concept of the mirror to show us that images are not facts, but reflections of our individual imaginations and assumptions.

This exhibition is made possible by the Susan B. Weatherbie Exhibition Fund and the Leon Levy Foundation.

Othello Re-imagined in Sepia
July 17–December 16, 2018

Curlee Raven Holton reinvents Shakespeare's *Othello* in this series of ten etchings, created in Venice in 2012. At once aesthetically decadent and psychologically raw, Holton's prints examine the inner life and public persona of Shakespeare's Moor of Venice, bringing to his story contemporary ideas about race, identity, and love.

This exhibition is made possible by a grant from the Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation and the gifts of individual donors in support of the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum's Diverse Voices Initiative.

Major Themes: Celebrating Ten Years of Teaching with Art
August 11, 2018–June 21, 2020

September 2019 marks the tenth anniversary of the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum's renowned Teaching with Art program. This two-year exhibition explores five broad themes inspired by the interdisciplinary, object-based conversations that occur when classes use the Museum as a site of discovery.

This exhibition is made possible by the Susan B. Weatherbie Exhibition Fund and the Leon Levy Foundation.

Life / Like: Photographs by Martine Gutierrez
January 15–June 17, 2019

Life / Like presents works from two recent series by emerging artist Martine Gutierrez that consider themes of transformation, intimacy, identity, and reality. Through her meticulous staging of each photograph, Gutierrez constructs lush, deeply ambiguous, and haunting images that defy our expectations of representation.

This exhibition is made possible by a grant from the Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation and the gifts of individual donors in support of the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum's Diverse Voices Initiative.

Mount Holyoke Afire
February 5–April 14, 2019

Mount Holyoke Afire examines three devastating blazes that had a significant impact on the College in 1896, 1917, and 1922. This show looks at the photographic record of the original Seminary building, Williston Hall, and Rockefeller Hall before, during, and after the fires, using objects to reconstruct what daily life was like in these buildings and contextualize what was lost.

This exhibition is sponsored by the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Archives and Special Collections, and the Departments of History, Art History, English, Geology, and the Office of the Dean of Faculty.

Photographer: Laura Shea, unless otherwise noted
Designer: Allison Bell
Editor: Kendra Weisbin

Cover: Joan Jonas (American, b. 1936), *Mirror Pieces Installation II,* 1969/2014, video and mixed media, Purchase with the Susan and Bernard Schilling Fund (Susan Eisenhart, Class of 1932) in honor of Wendy Watson, 2018.9, © 2018 Joan Jonas / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

This page: *Figurehead arm,* 19th century, American, painted wood, Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, Mount Holyoke College, SK 2006.1303.INV

Lasting Connections

Since my arrival at MHCAM two years ago, I have been struck by how Mount Holyoke fosters such loyal connections with its students during their time here and beyond. As a testament to this, it is my pleasure to share the thrilling news that influential alumna artist Joan Jonas '58 will return to the College as our campus-wide Leading Woman in the Arts speaker on October 18, 2018. This special visit will provide unique opportunities for our students to engage with Jonas, who has been a pioneer in video and performance art since the 1960s. In concert with her lecture, the Museum is presenting a yearlong, focused exhibition that examines her ongoing use of the mirror, *Promise of the Infinite: Joan Jonas and the Mirror.*

Director Tricia Y. Paik joins alumnae and their spouses for a reception at MOCA Cleveland during the 2018 Director's Circle trip.

What has also impressed me is the breadth and variety of alumnae who have committed themselves to the visual arts, whether as artists, such as Jonas, or as curators, art historians, gallerists, or patrons. This past April we hosted our Director's Circle tour in Cleveland, which boasts a vital and growing art scene. Fourteen MHC alumnae with several spouses joined us, and local civic leader and art philanthropist Leslie Dunn '67 generously co-hosted our welcome reception at MOCA Cleveland, where tour attendees mingled with other local alumnae committed to the arts.

Indeed, I continue to be inspired as I meet more and more alumnae who possess a deep appreciation for the visual arts, and for many, this love can be traced back to their time at the College and their experiences at the Museum. We at MHCAM believe our exhibitions and programs enrich Mount Holyoke's distinctive liberal arts education. In small and profound ways, we help shape the future of our alumnae, whether as medical students who have learned observation skills in biology classes held at the Museum, law students who have trained in our Student Guide program, or as burgeoning artists who have presented their senior theses in our Museum lobby.

Another way we are showcasing how the Museum enhances our students' liberal arts experience is through our two-year exhibition *Major Themes: Celebrating Ten Years of Teaching with Art,* on view through June 2020. Throughout the installation and other galleries, visitors will have an opportunity to experience a sampling of the innovative connections students and faculty make between original works of art and course topics. They will also be able to read the incisive labels written by our student and faculty collaborators.

We look forward to welcoming our talented students, committed alumnae, and engaged community visitors to an exciting roster of exhibitions and programs this year as well as in the years to come.

Tricia Y. Paik
Florence Finch Abbott Director

IN THIS ISSUE

Promise of the Infinite: Joan Jonas and the Mirror
July 17, 2018–June 16, 2019

Joan Jonas

One of the underlying themes of my work is the perception of space, and I work with various devices, such as the mirror, to alter the audience's experience of a space. My *Mirror Pieces* (1968–71) were performed in large indoor rooms—such as gyms, auditoriums, and lofts—and once outdoors. The performers, holding large mirrors, were choreographed in slowly moving, geometric patterns that echoed the dimensions of the performance spaces. I am interested in how images I make or find are transformed by a particular medium—the mirror in the series of *Mirror Piece* performances, distance in the outdoor works, and the closed-circuit system of video in video performances.

Today I use different mirrors—concave and convex—because they reflect and distort the image and change the space. Often instead of using special effects in video, I use the mirrors to create magical worlds, one step more removed. My camera, pointing at the mirror, records my gaze as I look indirectly into the lens reflected in the mirror.

This text originally appeared in the publication In the Shadow a Shadow: The Work of Joan Jonas *(New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., in association with Hatje Cantz and HangarBicocca), edited by Joan Simon and Joan Jonas, 2015. It has been republished with permission from the artist.*

Joan Jonas in mirror costume, ca. 1968. Photo: Peter Campus, courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise

Othello Re-imagined in Sepia
July 17–December 16, 2018

Curlee Raven Holton in conversation with Hannah W. Blunt, Associate Curator

Hannah Blunt: Can you tell me about the origins of *Othello Re-imagined in Sepia?*

Curlee Raven Holton: In 2010 I was invited to do a project at the International Printmaking Workshop in Venice as part of their "Remembering Venice" series, connected to the upcoming Venice Biennale. I told them I'd like to do something related to *Othello.* I came back for a month in 2012 and produced 10 plates based on illustrations I had done in my own studio in Pennsylvania. I was attempting to illustrate Othello in a way that was more sensitive to his cultural background, his history, and this idea of a person of color functioning in a predominantly white society and his connection to contemporary issues around race.

Being in Venice, I could go to museums and look at arms, swords, all those kinds of metalwork. I also did research on England's relationship with Moorish empires. That was the inspiration, supposedly, for Shakespeare's writing of *Othello.* There was an ambassador that was visiting the English court from Morocco and Elizabethan England had never seen anything like this. Apparently Othello was representative of this cultural encounter. So that is how I got really engaged with Othello in Venice.

At the closing of our residency, we were invited by the mayor of Venice to his home. The mayor took me over to a window and pointed out a mansion on the lagoon. He said, "That was Othello's home." You know, Othello was an imaginary character, but he was so real in Venice. I would go to the plaza sometimes (San Marco) and people would look at me and say "Ciao Othello." So it was such a real thing you know, it's amazing.

HB: How much time did you spend with Shakespeare's text?

CRH: Well, I have always been inspired by *Othello,* even when I was a student. That final line, "One kiss before death, sweet Desdemona," has always stayed with me.

Curlee Raven Holton

I gathered information from the text that would allow me to illustrate the important points: his arrival, his identity, the costumes and clothing. I went through a number of bookshops in Venice looking for copies of *Othello* to see if there had ever been a portrayal by an artist of color. I never found one. I thought I could bring some sensitivity to it.

I also started reading some of the things written by my colleague at Lafayette College, Dr. Ian Smith. Smith is a specialist on *Othello* and Shakespeare, and he is very interested in the personification of the other and how issues of otherness are still pervasive in society.

Curlee Raven Holton (American, b. 1951)
Dreams of Two Different Worlds (Competing fantasies in black and white), from the series *Othello Re-imagined in Sepia,* 2012
Etching
Partial gift of the Experimental Printmaking Institute, Lafayette College and purchase with the Jean C. Harris Art Acquisition Fund
2016.2.13.6a

HB: Let's hear more about this idea of reimagining *Othello*. Dr. Smith, who contributed an introduction to the portfolio, describes it as a response to Othello's appeal for a balanced account of his story. As his final line read, "I pray you, in your letters, when you shall these unlucky deeds relate, speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice." Can you elaborate on some of the ways that you're "relating" Othello's story?

CRH: It attempts to reposition Othello in a more positive light. He was a hero, but a negative portrayal of a hero. It makes the viewer think about the many black individuals who have achieved great distinction but always remain suspicious characters in public opinion.

Othello was brought in to save Venice but he was not invited into the society, because there were barriers against it. But at the same time, some people loved and cared for him. That's why the mask is so important in the print series. Everyone arrives with a mask, even Othello, but Othello is willing to take it off, meaning he is willing to become vulnerable and accessible. But even Desdemona continues to wear her mask. It's the idea that she does not really ever let herself go and become just a human in the interest of his affection. She still holds onto that tribal identity, that connection, and that privilege.

In one scene they're both talking about their past, or imagining their different paths forward. You can see her hand reaching to his chest. Instead of him penetrating her, she is penetrating him. So it is a switch, a sort of reversal of roles. It is the idea of giving Othello a sense of humanity, relevance, compassion, affection, and vulnerability.

And then the idea of using sepia ink is related to the context of skin color and race. It connects to Othello's own background, not the European background, but the Moorish, North African, and Islamic background.

HB: You were just talking about the image, *Dreams of Two Different Worlds,* right? I had been hoping you would tell me about the imagery in the background, behind the two characters. Do I see a Virgin Mary figure?

CRH: That's behind Desdemona, that's a classical religious reference. And then you see her riding a bull, that's the sexual reference. Dreaming of a bull, according to Jung and Freud, represents a certain kind of sexual desire. So Desdemona is dreaming of this bull which represents Othello, and he is dreaming of a past that has no connection to her past. They're coming from two different worlds and they are trying to merge those worlds. I'm suggesting that he is willing to merge his world. He gave up, in a sense, his Islamic religion, his background. He becomes a European general. So he is surrendering his past, his history, to become a member of this tribal group—the military. But what has Desdemona surrendered?

HB: Can you say more about the masks?

CRH: Masks are all over Venice! They have big celebrations and festivals where they wear elaborate gowns and masks.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger suggested that we are all on an axis, and that every now and then we reveal ourselves and conceal ourselves, so to speak. Homi Bhabha, a contemporary philosopher, speaks about it as well. That only with a certain kind of security and comfort are we willing to show ourselves, but outside of that we have a pretend self that is presented. So my prints explore this idea that Othello has a self that is available to the public, while Desdemona remains concealed by the mask.

In relationships, as you know, we often say "tell me the truth," and "how do you really feel?" Well, we're always hesitant because if we tell the truth it might undo those we love. We always negotiate that. In *Othello Re-imagined in Sepia,* Othello and Desdemona are negotiating the ability to share one's true identity and opinions with each other. So that's what the mask stands for. And then also the double consciousness that W.E.B. DuBois speaks about for African Americans: one self that negotiates American society and the other self that is hidden away—the patois, the other language.

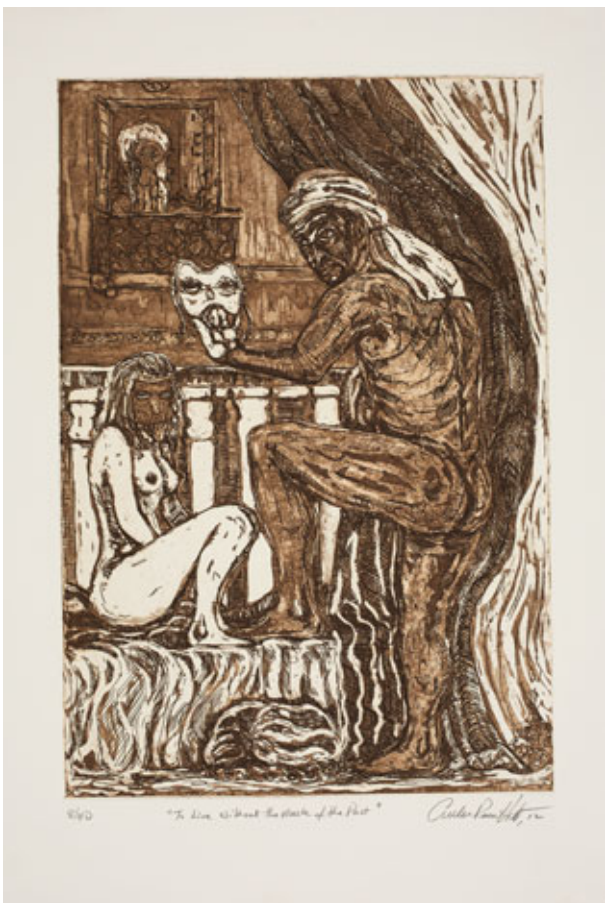
HB: How do you feel this project connects to your larger creative journey?

CRH: I'm glad you asked that question. When I look at artwork and think about artists, I try to get at their motives. What is the work really about? What are they saying? And some artists, they're making objects that can be profound, can be entertaining, indulgent, can be a whole set of things. But what is that artist using that object to assert? What positions are they taking with it? I think one of the principles of my work is the restoration of humanity.

If we can speak about humanity and move things that get in the way of expressions of humanity, I think that is the most positive thing. I think it's rooted in the historical experience of the African American—a person often represented with a kind of absence of humanity, a diminished sense of humanity, that one wasn't a complete human—and an effort to rehumanize the African American. This is a constant effort. Some of the major institutions related to the story of African Americans, whether it is the new Lynching Memorial, or the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture, represent a restoration effort. If we can tell this story, then we can reveal the incidents and the pain and the contradictions that existed. If we can do that, then we can get to the point where we can rebuild that sense of humanity.

The *Othello* series is a restoration of his humanity. To speak of his humanity is to speak of my own humanity. It's also an assertion of a cultural perspective and that cultural perspective is relevant.

To read the complete interview, visit artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/blog/othello-re-imagined-sepia



Curlee Raven Holton
(American, b. 1951)
To Live Without the Mask of the Past (Stripping layers, baring the body, forgetting race), from the series *Othello Re-imagined in Sepia,*
2012
Etching
Partial gift of the Experimental Printmaking Institute, Lafayette College and purchase with the Jean C. Harris Art Acquisition Fund
2016.2.13.8a

Major Themes: Celebrating Ten Years of Teaching with Art
August 11, 2018–June 21, 2020

Ellen M. Alvord, Weatherbie Curator of Education and Academic Programs; Hannah W. Blunt, Associate Curator; Aaron F. Miller, Associate Curator of Visual and Material Culture and NAGPRA Coordinator; Kendra D. Weisbin, Associate Curator of Education

Mount Holyoke College Art Museum has one of the most active Teaching with Art programs in the country. Each year approximately 180 college class sessions from 26 different disciplines are held in the Museum. This two-year exhibition brings these intimate behind-the-scenes encounters into public view for visitors to experience firsthand.

While the Museum's Teaching with Art program was officially launched in 2009 with a grant-funded initiative to engage classes across the curriculum, the idea of collecting objects for use in teaching is not a new one. The College began collecting in the 19th century and in 1876 opened Lyman Williston Hall, a new building dedicated to the arts and sciences. Faculty and students had access to a variety of collections including paintings, sculpture, minerals, fossils, plaster casts, and artifacts from around the world.

In recent years, the Museum has embraced its teaching mission with an eye towards experimentation and innovation under the stewardship of educators and curators, beginning with longtime (now retired) curator Wendy Watson. The Museum's classroom provides a space where art and artifacts can be combined in provocative juxtapositions not traditionally seen in public galleries. Faculty and students can look closely, think creatively, and make connections, conceptually linking objects with diverse course topics.

The exhibition presents five thematic sections inspired by the interdisciplinary dialogues that take place during these class visits. Over the course of the next two years the Museum will host a series of gallery conversations between faculty from different disciplines exploring these topics. Below we highlight one work of art from each of these sections to give you a window onto this experimental exhibition.

OPTICS OF ART

This section of the exhibition celebrates the Museum's many collaborations with scientists, cognitive psychologists, and mathematicians on campus, each of whom have provided insights into the world of artistic representation. One intriguing topic is the exploration of how the human brain processes visual information. For instance, looking up close at *The Sunlight Path* by Walter Sargent, the viewer can see individual strokes of vibrant colors such as orange, green, blue, and purple. However, at a distance, our visual system combines the colors into bright whites allowing us to perceive sunlight across a landscape.

Walter Sargent (American, 1868–1927), *The Sunlight Path,* 1913, oil on canvas, Purchase with the Nancy Everett Dwight Fund, 1916.95.I(b).PI

THE NON-HUMAN

Works as disparate as a Pablo Picasso print and a Peruvian jaguar-shaped vessel are brought together in this section to illuminate the myriad ways we interpret, represent, and interact with the non-human. This Turkmen weaving is made from the wool of sheep that belonged to the people who made it and would have decorated the camel carrying a new bride from her father's home to her husband's during a marriage procession. An object like this can help students explore the importance of animals in the daily lives of nomadic communities like the Turkmen.

Asmalyk (camel trapping), 19th century, Yomut Turkmen, wool warp, weft, and pile; symmetrical knot, Gift of Walter B. Denny, 2017.15

AFTERLIVES OF OBJECTS

Afterlives of Objects considers the biographies of objects—where they come from, the journeys they take, and how they end up at museums. An object like the *sowo wui* dance mask, made by the Mende people of Sierra Leone, was created to be used in an important ceremony. Works like this give us opportunities to engage with diverse histories and lifeways—yet an important conversation that often emerges is whether objects like this even belong in a museum. While MHCAM actively works with Native American and Hawaiian communities to repatriate sacred objects, that is not the case for many other groups from around the world. Why are some communities' sacred objects displayed while others are not? These are not easy questions to answer, but they are important conversations to have.

Sowo wui dance mask, early 20th century, African (Mende), wood and silver, Purchase with the Art Acquisition Endowment Fund, 2013.2

THE PRECARIOUS BODY

This theme is represented by works of art ranging from the historical to the contemporary. Two ambrotypes by Rowan Renee illuminate many of the themes dealt with in this section. In this series, Renee subverts the long tradition of the female nude in Western art, capturing images of gender nonconforming individuals in classical poses. Their bodies have been made precarious—at risk—by contemporary political and social forces. Yet they confront the camera head-on, seeming to challenge us to see them for who they are.

Rowan Renee (American, b. 1985), *Christine,* from the series *Z.,* 2015, silver on glass (ambrotype), Purchase with the Ann Nelson Behrman (Class of 1954) Art Acquisition Fund, 2015.21.1, Artist: Rowan Renee

CONFLICT & COMMEMORATION

Many of the images that appear in the Conflict and Commemoration section are disturbing—even violent—but some are more contemplative. For instance, small-scale prints by Joseph Goldyne force us to come close, creating a more intimate experience. Smoke pouring out of a fountain pen lends a surreal sense of violence to an everyday object. *Anne at Her Window* invites us into the small attic inhabited by Anne Frank while she hid from Nazi forces. We see Anne from behind, her face hidden as she pulls back the curtain to peer at the street below. Will this act put her in danger of being seen? Though a quiet and peaceful scene in many ways, it is also imbued with the tension of inevitable danger.

Joseph Goldyne (American, b. 1942), *Smoking Pen* and *Anne at her Window,* from the series *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl,* 1985, etchings, Gift of Lewis Shepard, 1991.36.3 and 1991.36.7, © Joseph Goldyne, Valley of the Moon, California

Life / Like: Photographs by Martine Gutierrez
January 15–June 17, 2019

Kendra D. Weisbin, Associate Curator of Education

It gives us peace of mind to believe a line separates virtual from reality, but perception until disproven by fact is truth; so if there is a line, it can be moved. – Martine Gutierrez

Martine Gutierrez's work deals with themes of transformation, intimacy, identity, and reality. In the two photographic series exhibited at MHCAM this spring, Gutierrez constructs lush, deeply ambiguous, and haunting images. In *Girl Friends,* two women appear in a variety of places and poses. Their intimacy is clear, though the nature of their relationship is not. Dressed and styled like twins, the women even possess a certain unity of gesture and stance. It is only upon looking closely that we realize that one of the women is a mannequin. The photographs are imbued with a sudden loneliness despite the appearance of female companionship. The discovery makes us question our perceptions of reality and our assumptions about representation.

The human model in these photographs is Gutierrez herself, and she employs great care and skill to evoke these narratives. She controls every aspect of each photograph—constructing the set, creating the costumes, setting up lighting, and doing her own hair and makeup as well as that of the mannequin. She took between 100–600 pictures for each composition, and has noted the difficulty of bringing life and energy to a scene between two people when half of the couple is inanimate—the burden of creating life rests on her.[1]

Gutierrez compares the images in her *Girl Friends* series to film stills. Through her masterful use of subtle details, the photographs are profoundly narrative, suggesting complex situations and relationships. However, it is ultimately left up to the viewer to imagine the story in each photograph.

In *Line Ups* Gutierrez also employs mannequins, this time positioning herself in a crowd of four, five, or six, all similarly dressed and styled. This series is also steeped in narrative qualities. Tied to her love of film, many of the images reference well-known actresses or scenes from movies. Here, the intimacy of *Girl Friends* is gone, replaced by an interest in the role of the individual within a collective. Gutierrez explores the loss of personal identity that occurs within a group, and the socially-constructed nature of our identities.

The women in Gutierrez's photographs are stereotypically feminine—whether glamorous, softly sensual, or overtly erotic. For the artist this interest in collective, socially-constructed gender

Martine Gutierrez
(American, b. 1989)
Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 2), 2014
© Martine Gutierrez
Courtesy of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

Martine Gutierrez
(American, b. 1989)
Line Up 5, 2014
© Martine Gutierrez
Courtesy of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

identities is deeply personal. Gutierrez, a trans woman, has said that it was this body of work that made her realize she wanted to be seen as a woman. She says, "My work continues to inform how I see myself or want to be seen—it is the only way I have found to validate my beauty and my expression of gender without being manipulated by social constructs."[2]

A nuanced exploration of gender roles lies at the heart of much of Gutierrez's work. It is perhaps this interest in boundaries—especially artificial boundaries—that leads Gutierrez to play with her viewer's expectations and perception of reality.

The artist has said, "Mannequins very succinctly represent the artificial, especially in materiality, when compared to the imperfect reality of the human body. But in coaxing the viewer's misinterpretation, misleading with light and guise, I am looking for the place where those two worlds meet."[3] Gutierrez's use of idealized mannequins that are simultaneously alluring and devoid of life underscores her awareness of social constructs of gender, while her carefully constructed film-like images belie our expectations of the real.

NOTES

1. Stuart Brumfitt, "Martín Gutierrez is Our New Favourite Performance Art Pop Star," *i-D Magazine,* April 9, 2015 (available online).

2. Lena Rawley, "This Artist Thinks Gender Is a Drag," *The Cut,* Feb 9, 2017 (available online).

3. Grace Banks, *Play with Me: Dolls, Women, Art* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2017), 112.

Mount Holyoke Afire
February 5–April 14, 2019

Robert Herbert, Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts

This exhibition, jointly sponsored by MHCAM and Archives and Special Collections, examines devastating fires that punctuate the history of the College: Seminary Hall in 1896, Williston Hall in 1917, and Rockefeller Hall in 1922. In a time of poor fire suppression and quick advances in gas lighting and electricity, the threat of fire became widespread. *Mount Holyoke Afire* looks at these three major fires and the important buildings they impacted.

The blaze of 1896 threatened to end the life of the institution because the Seminary building housed student and faculty living quarters, classrooms, offices, the gymnasium, the kitchen, and the dining and living rooms. The attached power plant was damaged but shortly resumed functions. There remained only the library and two academic buildings, Williston and Shattuck halls. The subsequent destruction of Williston Hall in 1917 was nearly as grievous, for it destroyed laboratories, as well as the collections and libraries of botany, geology, physiology and zoology. The loss of Rockefeller Hall in 1922 was far less traumatic but it displaced ninety students, seven teachers, and six maids who had to find accommodations elsewhere.

The exhibition features dramatic photographs of the still-smoldering Seminary and Williston halls and Rockefeller ablaze. Context for these campus spaces are provided by texts contributed by students alongside view-camera photos, early Kodak snapshots, stereopticon photos, period student letters, and several artifacts salvaged from the destroyed buildings. Other objects and casts will duplicate some of the things destroyed in Williston—known only through period photographs. Student researchers are taking advantage of the exhibition to do archival research on the life of the buildings before the fires and to show how the College replaced the destroyed structures with new buildings that created a vastly altered and larger campus. The show is curated by Robert Herbert, Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts, James Gehrt, Digital Project Lead, Digital Assets and Preservation Services, and Aaron F. Miller, Associate Curator of Visual and Material Culture.

Seminary Hall ruin, September 28, 1896
Archives and Special Collections
Mount Holyoke College

Rockefeller Hall on fire, December 22, 1922
Archives and Special Collections
Mount Holyoke College

Student Curators Breaking New Ground

Ellen M. Alvord, Weatherbie Curator of Education and Academic Programs
Aaron F. Miller, Associate Curator of Visual and Material Culture and NAGPRA Coordinator

For the last few years MHCAM has been exploring meaningful ways for students to engage with the collection and pursue original research projects. One particularly exciting format for showcasing student work has evolved into an innovative series of student-curated Collection Spotlights. Often these spotlights are organized by museum interns working on specific projects. Other collaborations with students emerge from classroom discussions during museum visits or thematic explorations related to special exhibitions. The student-curated displays can be integrated into a variety of Museum spaces including the permanent collection galleries, Hinchcliff Reception Hall (the Museum lobby), and the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum.

Students typically select a small group of objects or even a single work of art, usually from MHCAM or the Skinner Museum's permanent collections, but sometimes integrating other campus collections, new acquisitions, or students' creative projects. Topics frequently focus on issues or objects not typically highlighted in museum spaces and many of these projects tackle important concerns surrounding gender, race, and ethnicity. Mount Holyoke's commitment to critical thought and representing diverse perspectives dovetails directly with work being carried out at MHCAM to decolonize our collections, bring in community voices, and ask new questions.

Photographing Native America, on view in the Warbeke Gallery in fall 2018, reflects the innovative nature of these Collection Spotlights. Curated by MHCAM Student Guide Mac Chambers '19, this spotlight features recently-acquired photographs by Zig Jackson, contemporary artist and member of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation. These works are presented in illuminating juxtaposition with historical images from the Museum's permanent collection, inviting visitors to consider 19th-century representations of Native people through Jackson's eyes. Like many other student shows, this spotlight prompts the viewer to question how people and objects are represented in museums, and whose narratives and perspectives are privileged in these spaces.

Detail of the Collection Spotlight *Photographing Native America,* on view fall 2018.

This deeply thoughtful approach to museum curation can be seen in past Collection Spotlights as well, including one of the first examples in spring 2016. *Converging Cultures: Native America and the Early Tourist Market* examined Native American cultural production.

Curated by history major Allyson LaForge ’16, this spotlight combined objects from the Skinner and Art Museums’ collections. It deconstructed terms such as fine art, decorative art, and craft, revealing contradictions in the ways museums classify 19th- and early 20th-century objects made by Indigenous American craftspeople. Her show also illustrated how Native communities purposely preserved essential aspects of their culture and became active participants rather than passive actors in a changing American economy.

Relyn Myrthil ’19 gives a tour of *Remember Us: Sewing Our Past and Present Together* during Community Day.
Photo: Rob Deza

Recent spotlights have focused on a diverse range of students’ academic interests, including architecture, women’s studies, history, and mathematics. In fall 2017, computer science major and math minor Carla Gonzalez-Vazquez ’19 curated *Making Mathematics: 3D Models Then and Now* as part of an independent study. Carla was interested in exploring the artistic parallels between historical 19th-century plaster models of geometric forms and digitally-generated models of the 21st century. She created an informative display in the Museum lobby pairing examples from Mount Holyoke’s collection of historic plaster models, borrowed from Clapp Hall, with her own models created on a 3D printer in the College’s Makerspace.

Sometimes the scope of these spotlights is quite ambitious, such as the one curated by intern Relyn Myrthil ’19, *Remember Us: Sewing Our Past and Present Together,* in spring 2018. Relyn’s show featured quilts by the “Sisters in Stitches Joined by the Cloth” quilting guild, which depict stories of the African American struggle—from slavery to the racial conflicts of the present day. Complementing the themes of the textiles, Relyn incorporated historical Museum objects, such as a 19th-century sewing machine and iron, and creative texts contributed by the quiltmakers as well as students in Mount Holyoke’s Association of Pan African Unity (APAU).

As a first step to purposefully add more contextualizing information to the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, James Collings ’18 installed *The Skinner Museum and the Native Northwest.* Located in the foyer, this spotlight is a critical exploration of an important part of Skinner’s collection, examining how and why these objects were originally acquired and displayed. The spotlight also considers how our understanding of these objects and their makers have changed from Skinner’s time to our own.

The Collection Spotlight initiative has been a success because of the bright, engaged students who are drawn to Mount Holyoke and the Museum. These students are committed to investigating original works in the collection from new vantage points and pushing boundaries in ways rarely seen in museums today. We look forward to the continued evolution of these innovative collaborations with Mount Holyoke students.

Diverse Voices Initiative: Expanding Our Vision

Ellen M. Alvord, Weatherbie Curator of Education and Academic Programs

As MHCAM's grant-funded *Diverse Voices Initiative* enters its third and final year, Museum staff have already begun reflecting on lessons learned along the way. We have come to realize that as a teaching museum, our desire to create an inclusive environment is not only an immediate priority but also a meaningful process for continuous institutional renewal.

In our grant proposal, we defined our main objectives as twofold: expanding the diversity of voices represented in our galleries and reaching new audiences to engage with our collections. The pursuit of these goals began a transformation in our evolving vision for the future. As a staff, we have established collaborative models for exhibition planning and programmatic development. We are taking a similar approach for audience development, working with partners who might help us reimagine our relevance to a broader range of communities.

Just as there has been a move away from a lecture-only style of pedagogy in the classroom where one person controls the flow of information, so too the Museum has become a site for extending agency to an expanding circle of partners. As we are increasingly aware, real institutional change can only take place when individuals traditionally absent from the conversation are not only sought out, but are invited to shape and fully participate in museum activity.

Take for instance the cornerstone exhibition of our *Diverse Voices Initiative* from this past spring, *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph.* Mount Holyoke students became active participants in organizing school and public programs and engaging new visitors with the exhibition. Student guides designed interactive tours for school groups, and several led engaging close-looking sessions with quilts as part of tours for the general public. Education interns organized original activities for a Community Day celebrating quilts, and collaborated with members of a regional African American quilting guild, "Sisters in Stitches Joined by the Cloth," to reach new audiences. In turn, these local quilt-makers made connections with other student groups and the community, inspiring quilt projects on and off campus.

Grant-funded art and community engagement interns built upon a newly developed partnership program with the STEM-focused Springfield Renaissance School by leading tours and activities for over 80 12th graders visiting the Museum. They also designed a curriculum for smaller groups of students from the same high school, combining a

12th graders from the Springfield Renaissance School use the Makerspace to create work in response to the exhibition *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph.* Photo: Ellen Alvord

Our Museum, Our Voices: Art Acquisition Initiative

Wishing to expand and diversify our collection, over the last two years the Museum has been collecting feedback from students about the art—and perspectives—they feel are missing from our galleries. We have heard their voices and in response MHCAM piloted an acquisition initiative in spring 2018 that allowed students to take a leadership role in building the Museum's collection. The program simultaneously focused on collecting works by artists who have been historically underrepresented in American art museums.

In consultation with Museum staff, eight MHCAM student guides and two MHCAM art and community engagement interns chose three works of art for possible acquisition and presented the works to an audience of their peers at the Museum. Lively conversation and debate ensued and two new works of art were selected for the Museum's collection. The Museum is delighted to announce Lorraine O'Grady's *Framing Cop* and *Dancer in Grass Skirt* from the *Art Is . . .* series as the first *Our Museum, Our Voices* art acquisition.

– Kendra D. Weisbin, Associate Curator of Education

Students present works of art to their peers at the first *Our Museum, Our Voices: Art Acquisition Initiative* program. Photo: Kendra D. Weisbin

visit to the quilt exhibition with a hands-on, technology-related project in the College's Makerspace. Just as Museum staff empowered these undergraduate interns to create original lesson plans from start to finish, they in turn encouraged high school students to incorporate aspects of their own personal identities into their projects, thereby making more meaningful connections with the art. Teachers were inspired to plan a related project back in their classrooms where students worked together to create their own "senior class quilt" utilizing unclaimed clothing from the school's lost and found.

These successful components of the *Diverse Voices Initiative* have sparked other innovations. This past May and June, the Museum's summer education fellows led tours for local elementary students from the Mosier School and, for the first time, incorporated pre-visits to classrooms ahead of the museum field trips. Collaborating with teachers in advance, the fellows designed developmentally appropriate, hands-on activities for the 3rd and 4th graders, significantly enhancing the overall effectiveness of the outreach program. The grant also enabled us to hire a recent graduate of the Springfield Renaissance School to work with MHCAM fellows, giving her an opportunity to share her newfound love of art and history with a younger audience and solidifying her interest in pursuing a museum career.

The Museum's engagement with these new audiences has shown us how important it is to foster creativity and leadership skills as we seek a wider range of perspectives to shape our programming. One exhibition generated radiating circles of collaboration that eventually translated into a variety of on- and off-campus connections. This expanded array of partnerships brings an exciting vitality to our galleries and broadens our vision for meaningful interaction with Museum collections.

New Acquisition: A Painting by Edward Mitchell Bannister

Hannah W. Blunt, Associate Curator

In 1855, African American abolitionist William Cooper Nell published a report on prominent people in the black community. On the list was a young artist and political activist named Edward Mitchell Bannister. Bannister had only recently immigrated to Boston from New Brunswick, Canada when he earned this publicity. The endorsement was all the more exceptional given that Bannister's primary vocation was as a hairdresser, a trade he likely adopted to support his real passion—painting.

Bannister was born free and never experienced slavery first hand. Yet as a black man whose life encompassed the antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction eras, he faced ubiquitous racial discrimination; it limited his opportunities for training, restricted his exposure to art, and tainted his moments of professional success. When one of his paintings was awarded a major prize at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, the judges attempted to deny Bannister the award when they discovered he was black. "I have been sustained by an inborn love for art," he wrote, "and have accomplished all I have undertaken through the severest struggles which, while severe enough for white men, have been enhanced tenfold in my case."[1]

The Mount Holyoke College Art Museum recently acquired a circa 1885–89 painting by Bannister, which will be permanently installed in the Museum's galleries in early 2019. The first acquisition of a 19th-century painting by an African American artist, *Untitled [Rhode Island Coastal Scene]* is a critical addition to the Museum's holdings in American art. In the scene, three figures are seated on a rocky outcropping enjoying a coastal view from the shade of a red parasol. In a hollow below, a man in a yellow hat casually casts a fishing line. In the distance, the land stretches into the sea, dotted with quintessential sights of the Rhode Island shore: a grand Gilded Age building, a lighthouse, a rocky islet, and the white billow of a sail.

In 1869, Bannister moved from Boston to Providence, where he quickly achieved a leadership role in the artistic community. By 1878 he was serving on the original board of trustees of the Rhode Island School of Design and holding founders' meetings in his studio for the Providence Art Club. Providence also provided Bannister easier access to the rural environs that inspired his paintings. Bannister was a disciple of France's Barbizon School of painting—examples of which he observed at the Boston Athenaeum, one of the few cultural institutions open to blacks in that city. He believed art was about conveying a subjective experience, and about translating his individual communion with nature into paint. Technical virtuosity was not a requirement in this mode, but instead it demanded an eye for the subtle, unexpected moments of beauty in nature.

For Bannister, the landscape was much more than a subject to paint. It was a release from technical expectations that he could not meet—he struggled, in particular, with figure painting—disadvantaged as he was by individuals and institutions that denied him instruction on racial grounds. It also provided him endless accessible material, whether sketched *en plein air,* or translated from memory. He would often go walking along the Seaconnet and Palmer Rivers, in Jamestown, Greenwich, and Newport, Rhode Island, and in the summers, he sailed along the New England coast. The view in Mount Holyoke's painting is likely inspired by the many rocky inlets of the Narragansett Bay. The building in the middle distance is reminiscent of the distinctive Narragansett Pier Casino, constructed between 1883 and 1886.

Yet Bannister's many picturesque views of the Narragansett Bay belie the past atrocities of this place, and today, invoke important conversations about landscape and representation. In the 18th century, the voyages of nearly one thousand slave ships would have ended in the Narragansett Bay,

Edward Mitchell Bannister (American, b. Canada, 1828–1901)
Untitled [Rhode Island Coastal Scene],
ca. 1885–1889
Oil on linen on canvas
Purchase with the Susan and Bernard Schilling (Susan Eisenhart, Class of 1932) Fund
2017.25

resulting in the transport of more than 106,000 enslaved African people to the American colonies. The locale Bannister often sought out for its beautiful scenery is also one that conjures nightmarish images of our nation's past—a past that deeply affected the painter's own life. From his position as a free-born black artist, he studied the beauty of the physical landscape, while also facing the barbarity of the social and political one.

In an 1886 lecture at the Providence Art Club, Bannister said:

Not every one who wields the brush or chisel, not even everyone of these who has superior technical knowledge is an artist in the highest and truest sense… When the favored ones appear in either sphere of action let us try humbly to understand them and their mission, and rather than obstruct their work, [we should] level the mountains and fill up the valley before them.[2]

Here, Bannister uses landscape imagery to describe an artist's ideal experience—one very unlike his own—to be supported by an empathetic audience and unobstructed in their pursuit of art.

NOTES

1. Edward Mitchell Bannister quoted in William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (1887; reprint New York: Arno Press, 1968), 1129.

2. Edward Mitchell Bannister, "The Artist and His Critics," April 15, 1886, Ann-Eliza Club Papers, Manuscript Collection, Rhode Island Historical Society.

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Be sure to check out recent features on ***mhcameo,*** the Museum's blog:

✦ Didn't catch art historian Alvia Wardlaw's lecture on the life and genius of Gee's Bend quilter Mary Lee Bendolph? Watch the video of the event . . . and don't miss the moving, musical conclusion!

✦ Aspiring book conservator and MHCAM curatorial intern Juliana Cordero '18 shares her favorite artists' books from a remarkable collection donated by alumna Marjorie (Jerry) Cohn '60.

✦ Artist Curlee Raven Holton reflects on his creative journey in the full transcript of his conversation with Associate Curator Hannah W. Blunt.

✦ 2017–2018 Art Museum Advisory Board Fellow Katia Kiefaber '17 explores images of female intimacy in an obscure French volume from the 1930s.

✦ LYNK intern Clarissa Adan '19 finds a (baker's) dozen objects related to food in the Skinner and Art Museum collections.

artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu

To learn more about MHCAM exhibitions, events, and membership visit artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu

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museums 10