

NEWS

Celebrating women, art, science: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum offers diverse exhibits



by **Steve Pfarrer** Staff Writer
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Fabrizio Plessi, "Christallo Liquido," 1998, installation with small table, attached wine glass, and a silver bucket topped with a video screen. Mount Holyoke College Art Museum. Credit: Photo by Laura Shea

An upside-down table, suspended from the ceiling. A painting in which an artist's torso sprawls across a work table next to her pastels, brushes and other supplies. A photograph that captures the motion of a bouncing

ball by showing what seems to be graceful arcs composed of dozens of such balls.

At the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, variety is very much the word for this fall's exhibits.

For starters, the museum has tapped some very different curators for its shows, including a University of Massachusetts Amherst art professor and her students, as well as a Mount Holyoke science professor and some of the college's physics students.

In addition, some of the new shows — notably an exhibit in the Weissman Gallery, the museum's largest space — feature material from the college's collection that has not been on view for a long time, staff members say, including Surrealist paintings and contemporary artworks that examine themes such as water, motherhood, and domestic objects.

"It's unusual for us to have three simultaneous special exhibitions, but there was a nice confluence of smaller projects that fell into place for this fall," Hannah Blunt, the museum's associate curator, wrote in an email.

Consider, for instance, "A Very Long Engagement: Nineteenth-Century Sculpture and Its Afterlives," the first exhibit visitors encounter in the museum. The show features 15 small sculptures, mostly of bronze, from the 19th and 20th centuries, all from the museum's vaults. It has been put together by Gülru Çakmak, a professor of European art at UMass Amherst, and her students.

There is a delicacy and intimacy to these small statues that's immediately appealing; their size, Blunt notes, "promotes close-looking in 360 degrees. The way the works have been installed, they really seem to convey action and narrative."

For instance, the two young deer depicted in "Fawns Playing," a 1934 work by U.S. artist Anna Hyatt Huntington, can seem playful from one angle but combative from another.

The exhibit also features an unusual collaboration from 1918-19, "Danseuse au Tambourin" ("Dancer with Tambourine"), a sort of half-relief, half-sculpture by impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir, then in his late 70s and rather arthritic, and a young French sculptor, Louis Fernard Morel. Though the left side of the dancer's body is mostly flat and part of the background of the piece, her right arm and leg are raised, creating an illusion of movement as you pass the sculpture.

And "Floating Helmet," an abstract work by 20th-century artist Dimitri Hadzi, suggests a number of possibilities. The sculpted form at the top of the vertical sculpture might indeed represent a soldier's

helmet, and with it a nod to the 20th century's terrible wars, but it might also pass for a turtle's shell, and the angular forms below it for the tendrils of a jellyfish.

Or could the entire form represent a more terrifying image — a mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion?

Surrealists and Moderns

Blunt, who curated the exhibit of Surrealist paintings and other contemporary artwork from the museum's collection, said she was particularly interested in highlighting women artists, such as Dorothea Tanning and Kay Sage, from the Surrealist movement.

One of the most compelling canvasses from that show is a 1979 work, "Still in the Studio," by Tanning, a self-taught American artist and writer born in 1910 (she died in 2012 at age 101). The painting reveals a half-formed human figure — a reddish blob stands in for the head — sprawled across a large wooden table, with pastels, paint brushes and water glasses to the right; the whole scene is haloed in a weird, filmy light.

Just beyond the table, a tall window offers a view of a dark sky and the edges of old-looking buildings (Tanning lived in France at the time); strange, ghost-like shapes seem to cling to the window edges. It's a disturbing yet arresting image.

An earlier work, 1929's "Lurid Sky," by French painter Yves Tanguy, does in fact feature a rather sickly looking yellow-green sky in which strange objects — a few look like distorted butterflies — hover. A thin horizon line at the bottom of the oil painting reveals a barren landscape, perhaps a reference to the destruction from World War One, and the canvas overall seems a troubled dreamscape.

A different war influenced "All Souls (Masindi)" by Jane Hammond, a 1972 Mount Holyoke alumna and an artist who works in several mediums. "All Souls," a collage created with acrylic and gouache paint, colored pencil, graphite and metal leaf — among other items — was inspired, according to exhibit notes, by a dream Hammond had in 2004 after watching TV footage from the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Hammond was initially moved to create a symbol for peace that would be superimposed on a map of Iraq, but she changed the piece to a map of Uganda, on handmade paper, that in turn is studded with dozens of colorful butterflies created from different materials.

The Weissman Gallery exhibit also includes some remarkable sculptures, like a baby's blanket and cradle made of bronze, as well as "Christallo Liquido" by Italian installation artist Fabrizio Plessi.

The latter work, which can't help but produce a smile, includes a small table with attached wine glass, mounted upside down and suspended from the ceiling; beneath it is a silver bucket that's topped with a video screen, which in turn displays the sights (and sounds) of drops of water hitting a larger pool of water.

It's all in the motion

Two smaller exhibits are designed to complement each other. William Kentridge's stop-motion animated film "Tango for Page Turning" features a variety of images, including some silhouettes doing the tango, superimposed on the rapidly turning pages of a chemistry book from the late 19th century.

Blunt said the museum had been interested in showing the film since acquiring joint ownership (with five other Northeastern colleges) of it in 2015. That opportunity came with the opening in the adjacent space of "Beautiful Physics: Photographs by Berenice Abbott," which was organized by MHC physics professor Spencer Smith.

The two exhibitions "were related, and conceived to be shown together," said Blunt.

The 10 pictures by Abbott, a celebrated 20th-century photographer whose work primarily documented urban settings and architecture, were taken at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to illustrate fundamental physical laws, such as gravity, for a new textbook. But in creating her black-and-white photos, Abbott also created some starkly beautiful images.

A bouncing ball in a time-exposure photo, for instance, creates a series of graceful arcs of diminishing height. A close-up of soap bubbles forms an otherworldly looking latticework, and a picture of a magnetic field suggests an exotic nebula in deepest space.

It is a small but engaging exhibit that joins the worlds of art and science — an important goal for the college's museum, Blunt notes, which always looks for opportunities to "connect our exhibitions... with the college's curriculum, and with student and faculty research."

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For more information on exhibits and visiting hours at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum (which is free), visit artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu.

