

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Woodmere Annual is your chance to see how Philly artists see the world right this instant

By Thomas Hine
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DETAIL FROM "GREEN SHIRT" (2019) BY DAVID AIPPERSPACH, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

A duck looks in the mirror and sees a chicken. The man in a photograph seems to be looking into a verdant wilderness, but his shadow tells you he is simply looking at a photograph. Next to it, a painting of a green plaid shirt is so deeply detailed and vivid, it evokes the photographed forest. Nearby, a photograph shows a billboard, high in the air, with a picture of a forest on it. This is just one little thicket in the Woodmere Art Museum's 78th annual juried exhibition, on view June 1 through Sept. 2. But it is typical of this summer's show in the way it keeps viewers off balance.

This often enigmatic but very stimulating show prompts us to wonder what we are looking at, what we hope to find there. We keep encountering things that aren't quite what they first seem, and we ponder how the world is full of "fakes" and whether anything in art — especially representational art — can be "real."

Those American eye-foolers from a century and a half ago, painters like William Harnett and James Peto, once came across as quaint antiquarian curiosities. But this show contains at least a dozen works that seem influenced by them. There are a meticulous painting of a coin collection, a wall-mounted wooden sculpture with painted shadows, a postcard from Florida that looks bent and on a table.

A paper plate is painted to resemble a piece of Sevres porcelain. One painting reproduces the famous Audubon print of a blue heron, sitting atop a drafting table. Another painting is a picture of two very similar paintings, set at an angle to each other, creating the illusion of a space that can't exist. Yet another creates an ersatz coffee shop signboard in which every entrée features toast.

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One can only conclude that Philadelphia-area artists are currently experiencing a trompe l'oeil moment.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Great Blue Heron (2017) by Olivia Jia

One thing that draws viewers to the Woodmere Annual — as it does to larger and more hyped biennial shows at New York's Whitney Museum, in Venice, and throughout the world — is the promise of news. We hope to find work that is significant and unfamiliar and that provides new ways of looking at the world in which we live. We dive into the hodgepodge, hoping for gems.

The Woodmere Annual and its counterparts sometimes deliver on this hope, though the truth is that they are not always trying. Any artist within a 50-mile radius of Woodmere's Chestnut Hill address can submit work for consideration. But the person doing the selecting, nearly always an artist, is the key. The juror's reputation helps determine what gets submitted, and the juror has the choice of embracing the chaos and diversity that is always part of the arts scene or making a statement of her own.

This year's annual, judged by artist, critic, and educator Eileen Neff, is an extreme example of the second approach. Unlike other Woodmere Annuals, it isn't defined by a handful of standout works. It demands to be seen and considered as a whole.

It contains only three works by Neff, including the photograph of the man looking at the forest and a photo of a couple of washcloths on a clothesline that is probably the exhibition's most striking image. Still, these create a strong context for the 94 other artists whose 99 works are on view.

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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

"Monteazul" (2014/2019) by Eileen Neff

Neff designed the installation of the show, much of which consists of dense clusters of works by different artists in different media.

The result is a show that seems to consist not of discrete artistic statements, but rather a set of related installations orchestrated by Neff. In a sense, she is playing a role not unlike Albert Barnes, who organized his collection to illustrate his theories of how art should be looked at and who paid little attention to the artists' intentions.

Neff's design for the show follows a certain dream logic in which everything you see seems connected, though in inconsistent ways. One work in a cluster might relate to the work to the left of it because they share shape or color, and it might connect to the ones above or to the right because they evoke art from the past, or because their subjects, or even their titles, are similar. I saw the exhibition before its installation was complete. There were no labels, which certainly influenced the way I saw the show. Still, I think this dream logic is part of Neff's strategy. We are meant to move seamlessly from work to work and occasionally to awaken as from a dream and puzzle out what it all means.

This is a very philosophical show about seeing and art-making. It seems inevitable that it contains a work that alludes to Plato's argument that the reality we see is no more than the shadows of a deeper reality. *Seeing Is Believing* by Lawrence Souder consists of a machine that projects a shadow of a woman in a rocking chair against the wall of a niche in the Woodmere's gallery. It is accompanied by a quotation from Plato.

Seeing Is Forgetting by Clint Jukkala seems to relate to an even more ancient Greek idea that the eyes emit rays and that each of us is constructing a world in our heads. His graphic is crude and a little bit comical.

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COURTESY OF FRED GIAMPIETRO GALLERY

"Seeing Is Forgetting" (2018) by Clint Jukkala

The work is paired with Ilana Dodelson's *"Good Heavens"/Reading Room*, in which a ghostly yellow figure reads over the shoulder of a seated man. The light emanating from the eavesdropper's eyes appear to illuminate the reader's book.

They are contrasting works, but both hint that seeing is an aggressive act.

Some works, including a glass sculpture, a couple of paintings, and a video, show images that one can only barely see. Marissa Georgiou's *With Your Eyes Closed, in the Woods* — probably the exhibition's best-titled work — seems at first to be a kind of weaving, but upon scrutiny, it does evoke the experience it promises.

Seeing is difficult, the show tells us. But we can't help doing it, even if we're trying not to look.

ON EXHIBIT

The Annual: Woodmere's 78th Juried Exhibition

June 1-Sept. 2, Woodmere Art Museum, 9201 Germantown Ave.

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday.

Admission: Adults, \$10; seniors 55-plus, \$7; children and students with ID, free; free to all on Sundays.

Information: 215-247-0476 or woodmereartmuseum.org.

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