

## 'Uncommon Likeness' explores identity in one of best ever Sheldon exhibitions

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What is identity? How is it expressed through art?

Those are just two of the questions addressed by “Uncommon Likeness: Identity in Flux,” the just-opened major exhibition at the Sheldon Museum of Art.

Curated by Wally Mason, Sheldon’s director and chief curator, associate director Todd Tubutis and Carrie Morgan, curator of academic programs, the 18-piece exhibition doesn’t definitely answer those questions -- or any of the others raised by viewing the work.

But it provides some hints at both, looking at ethnicity, the assumption of multiple identities and roles, reflections on a long life and observations of history from international perspectives through multiple media, incorporating three-dimensional objects into the usual mix of paintings and photographs.

All the work in “Uncommon Likeness” is “portraiture” -- that is if the portrait can be stretched to include Nick Cave’s “Soundsuit” a costume in which the wearer is unrecognizable or a painting in which a face emerges from slashing expressionist marks.

None of the works were designed to “talk” to each other. But, in fact, they do, sometimes visually, sometimes via their subject matter.

The latter is seen on opposite walls of a gallery space. On one end hangs “God Turned Backwards,” a 1987 oil on canvas by Carlos Alfonzo.

A Cuban refugee who was part of the 1980 Mariel boatlift, Alfonzo settled in Miami and produced acclaimed paintings, like “God Turned Backwards,” the abstract painting that draws on early Jackson Pollock and incorporates in veiled

images drawn from Santeria. The horror of those paintings, in part, came from the battle of Alfonzo, a gay man, with AIDS, which took his life in 1991.

On the opposite wall is Kyle Meyer's "Sthembiso," a photographic print woven with strips of fabric worn by the sitter. The sitter is a gay man from the southern African country of Swaziland, where Meyer traveled to document the HIV/AIDS epidemic. He's wearing a brightly colored woman's headdress, taboo self-expression for a gay man in a country where homosexuality is a criminal offense.

A striking visual connection is easily made between Cindy Sherman's "Untitled (#138)," one of her staged photographic self-portraits, and Heidi Schwegler's sculpture "Passing Resemblance." The creepy little sculpture is also a self-portrait with life-size, accurate renditions of the artist's head and hands attached to a commercially produced doll body.

It sits on the floor near Sherman's piece in which she looks demented, sitting awkwardly on a chair, wearing a disheveled black-and-white striped haute couture dress with blood on her fingertips. Originally shot for French Vogue, the photograph is as creepy as Schwegler's sculpture as it questions fashion imagery and the idealized self while Schwegler looks at the nature of the artist's body.

There are other connections as well. The 3,000 dog tags sewn onto a U.S. military jacket liner in Korean artist Do Ho Suh's "Metal Jacket" and "Drag," Irish artist Richard Mosse's brightly colored digital print shot on Kodak Aerochrome film that renders greens vivid pink of a fighter in the Congo, carrying a gun and pulling an arm through the underbrush are striking examples of identity in the military and battle.

And, subtly, the eyes manufactured for use in Hindu temples arranged by Indian artist Anita Dube "River Disease (Version 2)," a wall piece that could be a depiction of a river, but also looks like a hand or a claw connected in odd fashion with the eyes in Laurie Simmons' "How We See/Edie (Green)," a large color photograph of a woman with eyes painted on her eyelids.

The most explicit connection is between Francisco de Goya's 1799 etching "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (plate 43 of The Caprices)" and Yinka Shonibare's "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (America)."

Shonibare's 2011 large color photograph restages the Goya print, inserting African-inspired, colonial-era textiles created by Europeans adding to the critique of Enlightenment society while tying in America, via trade routes. This is the first time the two pieces from Sheldon's collection have been shown together.

“Uncommon Likeness” works because it is largely a contemporary art show. Only Philip Guston’s “Pit II,” a comic-style meditation on death with shoes coming out of a pit” from 1976, the Sherman photograph and Alfonzo’s painting were made before 1999.

It would not have been possible without the contributions of collectors Karen and Robert Duncan and Kathryn and Marc LeBaron, who between them, loaned about half of the pieces to show.

“Some of these works have been seen in Lincoln,” Mason said. “But not by the general public. They were very interested in that ... They had traveled the world and bought art and gave us an opportunity that we could show some of it. We’re lucky to have them.”

To that end, the exhibition includes work by three of today’s in-demand African-American artists.

Kehinde Wiley is represented by an “Untitled” early painting in his career of a contemporary black man in a T-shirt inside an Old Master setting that has a striking “reveal” on close viewing.

Hank Willis Thomas’s “The Cotton Bowl,” examines African-American identity via a photograph of two men at a line of scrimmage, one a football player, the other a slave picking cotton.

Nathaniel Mary Quinn’s “Big Bertha,” uses charcoal, pastel, paint, silver leaf and gouache to create a fractured portrait that combines a boxer’s arm and glove, a woman’s hair and pieces of the faces of several people.

The latter two are recent purchases by Sheldon, important additions to the collection.

“Uncommon Likeness” was inspired by the E.N. Thompson Forum on World Issues, the annual lecture series that takes place on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus. The theme of identity emerged as Sheldon staff looked at how it could respond to the forum’s 2016 theme of “Crossing Borders.”

That is one of the connections between the show and the campus. The exhibition is also designed to engage students and faculty, one of Mason’s aims for Sheldon in its role as an academic art museum.

“These are the kinds of questions that are in students’ minds, it seems to me,” Mason said. “This is what we’re supposed to do.”

The show, however, isn’t a dry academic affair -- even the labels on the objects make observations about the nature of the work and identity rather than recounting the biography of the artist. And it certainly isn’t a dull chronological march through the history of the portrait.

Instead, it is a challenging exhibition that mixes sculpture with paintings, photography and prints that may, in the end, raise more questions than it answers.

In doing so, however, it fixates the viewer on the idea of identity being expressed through the strikingly presented contemporary work and becomes one of the best-ever exhibitions at Sheldon.

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