

LaylahAliPollyApfelbaumFionaBanner
ClaireBarclayUtaBarthRichard
BillinghamAmbreenButtMaria
MagdalenaCampos-PonsWillieCole
MelvinEdwardsTonyFeherRobert
FerrandiniSalomonHuertaJimIsermann
HowardJohnsonByronKimJimLambie
CharlesLeDraySharonLockhartDavid
MaiselMiltonMontenegrolñigoManglano-
OvalleBeatrizMilhazesPaulNoble
CatherineOpieJohnO'ReillyNamJune
PaikSigmarPolkeJenniferReevesFaith
RinggoldAlexanderRossDorisSalcedo
GarySchneiderJennyScobelYinka
ShonibareAmySillmanKikiSmithLily
vanderStokkerDo-HoSuhShellburne
ThurberBillViolaRachelWhiteread

Frontiers

Collecting the Art of Our Time



Bill Viola, *Union*, 2000, color video diptych on two plasma display monitors, 8 minute duration, 102.87 x 127.00 x 17.78 cm. Partial gift from Don and Mary Melville with additional funds from the Sarah C. Garver Fund. Photo courtesy James Cohan Gallery.

Frontiers: Collecting the Art of Our Time

November 13, 2005 – February 12, 2006

In 1998, the Worcester Art Museum announced a significant addition to its endowment for an ongoing program in Contemporary Art and with it, a renewed commitment to collect work made within the last 10 years by living artists from around the world. It is an outlook that assures the Museum's ongoing engagement with the present and emphasizes acquiring works by a younger generation of artists. *Frontiers* marks the first occasion that a significant selection of acquisitions from this growing part of the collection is on view. Characterized by a youthful and multicultural personality as well as a diversity of materials, processes, and concepts existing simultaneously, *Frontiers* is a mirror of the formal and cultural hybrids typical of art making today.

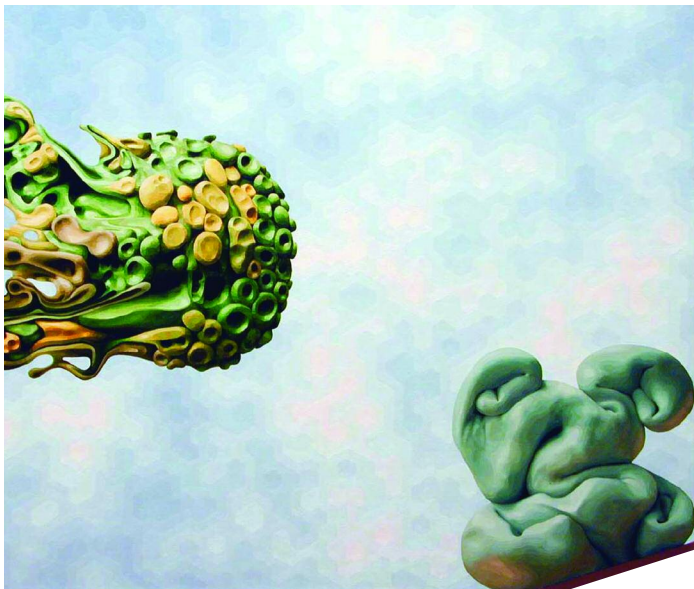
While we might imagine how the art in *Frontiers* will reflect for future generations many of the cultural developments and social conditions of recent years, when seen today within the context of the Museum's historic collection, it reminds us that all the art in the Museum's collection was at one time "contemporary art." The Worcester Art Museum has a strong tradition of meeting the unique challenges of collecting the new work of living artists, going back to the daring purchases of the 1903 *Waterloo Bridge* and 1908 *Water Lilies* canvases by Claude Monet in 1910. Nearly a century later, the Museum's acquisition in 2001 of **Bill Viola's** *Union*, a video created in 2000, exemplifies how the Museum's collection continues to reflect the

most current artistic practices and embody the same dynamics as the time to which it belongs.

Contemporary art, in any format, is a critical tool for everyone who is interested in learning about and participating in today's world through the creative core inherent in each of us. The art in *Frontiers* broadly explores the contradictions of the times in which we live with deliberate and provocative juxtapositions of detailed naturalism and pure fantasy, the handcrafted object and the digitally-produced image. Artists

are experimenting with new forms of narrative and revitalizing the potentials of abstraction. They are sampling from the grab bag of the latest scientific and technological data while also looking for meaning through a thrift-store vernacular.

"Frontiers" alludes to new territories in which to operate, expanded sensibilities, and conceptual gaps in preexisting practices in which innovation can happen. With a combined spirit of expectancy and urgency characteristic of the beginning of a new century, today's artist-visionaries necessarily embrace the world's uncertainties while navigating its complexities. Appealing to our innate sense of adventure and desire for knowledge, artists regularly open doors to thinking about contemporary experience in ways that did not exist before. This exhibition features over 40 artists, from as far away as Bogota and as close to home as Boston and Worcester, who inspire us to follow them through four thematic "frontiers" as they envision the possibilities of place in *Uncommon Terrains*, re-imagine the human body's symbolic potential in *Human Nature(s)*, probe the sensory and physical worlds in *Material Revelations*, and weave narratives of life and myth in *Telling Tales*.

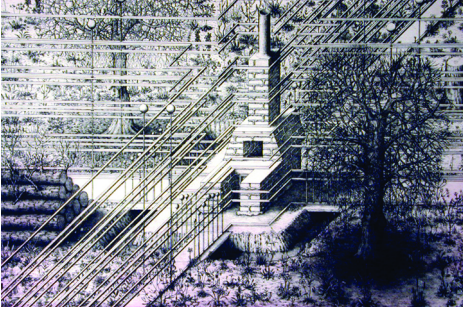


Alexander Ross, *Untitled*, 2001, oil on canvas, 142.24 x 168.91 cm., Gift of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York; Hassam, Speicher, Betts, and Symons Fund.

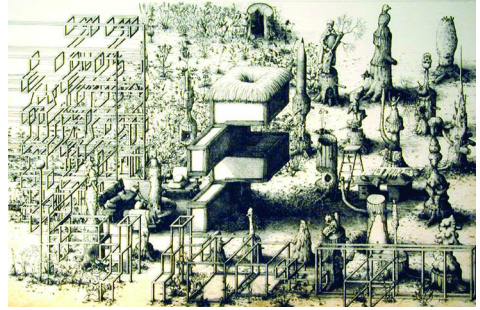
Uncommon Terrains

The dialogue between the exterior world and the interior self that these images inspire connects the sometime disparate languages of photography, painting, and etching. Ideas of place include those that look to the lessons of the past as well as the uncertainties of the future. Whether they revisit familiar subjects or existent sites, or they are the result of pure imagination, these works map concepts of place that exist foremost in the minds of the artists—worlds where, in the place of natural laws, the rules are those particular to an artist's medium.

Alexander Ross' enigmatic painting, *Untitled* (2001), exists somewhere in the gap between the tangible and the imaginary, between modernist tradition and science fiction. Its imagery morphs between the organic (cells, plants, pods) and the artificial (pixels, plastics, maps). While he cites computer-generated imagery as well as current trends in biotechnology, material science, artificial life, and topography as some of the influences behind his paintings, his studio process is very hands-on, beginning with making detailed models of biomorphic forms in Plasticine (jade-colored clay),



Paul Noble, *A* and *Paul's Place*, 2002, etchings, 66.04 x 90.17 cm each, 21/30. Austin S. Garver Fund.



photographing them, and then painting from the cropped and edited photographs. Ross' hybrid image of two alien creatures against a pixelated blue sky—born of myriad data but realized in paint—emulates both the anxiety and promise we feel about the external world at the beginning of the 21st century.

Paul Noble refers to the cityscape he invented, Nobson Newtown (named after its creator) as “an exercise in self-portraiture via town planning.”¹ This series of drawings and prints stems from Noble’s personal experience of place—a British mining town near where he grew up and contemporary London where he has lived as an adult—and forms a 21st-century caricature of city planning and the follies of urban modernism. With elaborate detail, Noble makes visible the controlling roles that design and language play in shaping our environments. In this fantastically eccentric architectural sprawl, buildings constructed from blocky (and often unreadable) typeface designed by Noble, spell out various place names in the city. “*Paul's Place*” (a pun on his earlier and more luxurious *Paul's Palace*) is home to a fenced-in sculpture park complete with bizarre topiary, a giant pencil, and assorted weedy botanicals. In the companion print, the deleted letter “A” becomes a furnace in a barren garden. Its inhabitants nowhere in sight, Nobson Newtown stirs a range of emotions we associate with the places we live, giving concrete form to our inner anxieties about urban development at the expense of communities and individual lives.

Human Nature(s)

Contemporary images of the human body and all its surrogate forms—from empty garment to body fragment and genetic information—continue to search for answers to the timeworn question, “Who am I?” While they may not engage in likeness in a traditional sense, they nonetheless wrestle with social issues underlying representations of the figure, such as gender roles, domestic relations, cultural stereotypes, public and private personas. With varying degrees of compassion and detachment (and occasional humor), contemporary artists ask us to rethink what constitutes our “human nature.”

Kiki Smith is widely recognized for her role in bringing the human figure, in all its mortal urgency, back to the center of contemporary art



Kiki Smith, *Girl with Blue Dress*, 2003-4, painted ceramic, 101.6 x 35.6 x 35.6 cm. Stoddard Acquisition Fund. © Kiki Smith, Courtesy PaceWildenstein. Photo by Ellen Labenski.



Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Identity Could be a Tragedy*, 1995, 6 large format Polaroids, 60.96 x 50.80 cm each, Eliza S. Paine Fund.

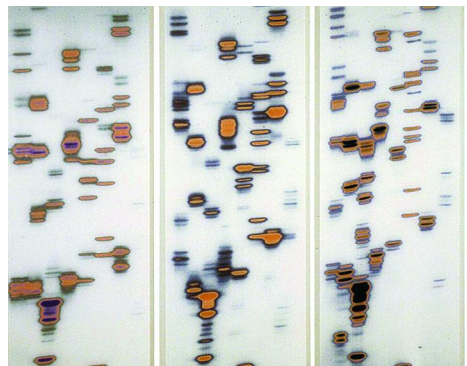
making. While much of her work in the '80s examined the body and its functions from the inside, during the '90s she began paying attention to the figure's exterior. Frequently exploring human nature from the perspective of female subjects (including herself) from goddesses and nymphs, to biblical figures or characters from fairy tales, around 1999 Smith began to focus on themes of childhood, addressing not only the tenderness and vulnerability but also the loss of innocence. In the painted passages of *Girl with Blue Dress*, we see evidence of Smith's delicate handwork. Subtle imperfections on the exterior are proof of this young adolescent's existence in the physical world, while her thoughts, hopes, and fears, remain safely hidden behind a mask of mystery and calm.

Identity—how people see you and define you—can translate into opportunity or disadvantage. **Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons**, a Cuban expatriate of Nigerian ancestry who has lived in the U.S. since 1988, asks us to consider an extreme scenario, how *Identity could be a Tragedy*. Purposely leaving a "trace of herself" (and her color) in her art over the years, here she faces the large-format Polaroid camera (and us) eyes shut, and confronts the threat of social invisibility. Her body is symbolic of the collective absence of the black body in the history of art and a fragile link to the imposed transparency experienced by her

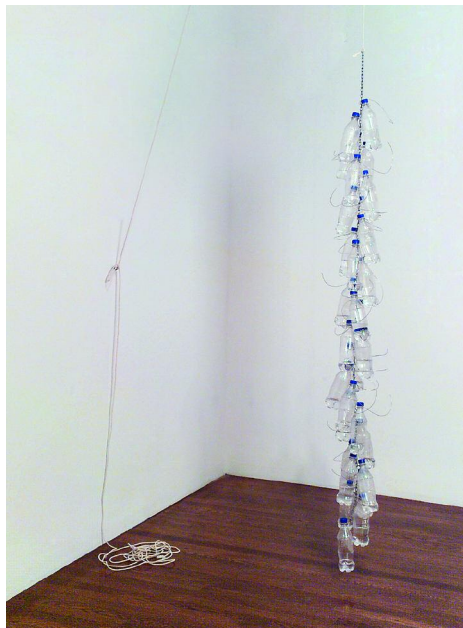
ancestors who came to Cuba in the 19th century as slaves. In the repetition of image and text, Campos-Pons is emphatic about offering herself, not someone else and not once but six times—as affirmation of her individual and physical presence, no matter how vulnerable.

Artistic exploration frequently parallels the scientific invention of its time. In the area of contemporary portraiture, markers of individual identity and family relations have moved beyond external appearance to genetic makeup. For a family portrait of artist Byron Kim, his partner Lisa, and their son Emmett, **Iñigo**

Manglano-Ovalle worked with a genetics laboratory to digitally convert DNA samples of his subjects (like those typically used to determine paternity, predisposition to genetic diseases, or criminal culpability) into three corresponding color photographs. Abstract by conventional standards, these portraits are nonetheless exacting in terms of genetic "likeness" and challenge traditional identification. As the artist notes, "With genetics there is a possibility that the categories at stake in the future are not going to be the old categories. Let's say black and white. Or let's say brown and yellow. Let's say kinky hair or straight hair. If the categories are going to be different, they are going to be beneath the skin."²



Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, *Byron, Lisa, Emmett* (from the series *Garden of Delights*), 1998, 3 C-prints, 152.40 x 58.42 cm. Eliza S. Paine Fund.



Tony Feher, *Linear B*, 2001, plastic bottles, caps, galvanized steel D-chain, stainless steel wire, water and cotton sash cord, 241.30 cm height, 45.72 cm diameter. Sarah C. Garver Fund.

Material Revelations

The translation of an idea into a physical object entails a delicate and complex balance between representation and invention, between what already exists in the world and what an artist brings into the world. Today, that world is being reconfigured digitally and our lives are increasingly structured by daily encounters with virtual reality. By subtly putting pressure on what we think we know about the things around us, some artists invite us to consider how even the most obvious “facts” of the physical things we encounter—wax-print fabric, plastic bottles, silver chains, a wooden door, even paint—are never only what they first seem to be; rather, art regularly depends on the possibility of one thing revealing another.

Tony Feher’s use of “forgettable” materials, which surround us constantly and have little aesthetic value to most of us, is indebted to the radical practice of Marcel Duchamp, whose simple yet extraordinary act in 1914 of selecting a common bottle rack and signing it wrenched that object out of the “useful” context and

placed it in the context of a “work of art.” In *Linear B*, Feher employs the ubiquitous plastic soda bottle and materials purchased at the hardware store with little, if any, alteration, so that their physical natures function in terms of traditional sculptural tasks: density, color, light, mass, texture, scale. Clear bottles of water create transparent planes and horizons; ascending blue bottle caps articulate a column; lengths of cord, chain, and wire read clearly as lines in space yet at other times seem to disappear. Feher has observed, “I think people are looking all the time, but I don’t think they are seeing anything. And I think that’s true not just with a piece of art that’s in front of them, but in a larger cultural sense...If you can accept a soda bottle with condensation on the inside as a work of art, then maybe that’s a way of seeing a broader picture, or of seeing the world from a different point of view.”³



Yinka Shonibare, *Deep Blue*, 1997, emulsion, acrylic on textiles (25 panels), 30 x 30 x 5 cm each. Charlotte E. W. Buffington Fund.

Yinka Shonibare was born in London but spent most of his youth in Nigeria and returned to London to attend art school. His dual nationality is central to his art and the questions of identity it provokes. Like many of Shonibare’s multi-part installations, *Deep Blue* raises questions about authentic origins, both cultural and aesthetic. What is African? What projections are involved when we automatically judge certain colors and patterns as “African” or “European,” “modern” or “primitive?”



Amy Sillman, *A Long Drawing: Untitled #15 (Twins)*, 2001, gouache on paper, 52.07 x 102.87 cm. Sarah C. Garver Fund.

Consciously hybrid in nature, *Deep Blue* was not painted on traditionally stretched canvas, but on panels of what appears to be “authentically African” textile. Although structured with a nod to modernism (the grid on a field of “deep blue”), the abstract painted passages play off the brightly colored and patterned traditional designs visible in areas of exposed cloth. But Shonibare’s strategy of using a signifier of “African-ness” is ultimately to expose it as ethnic myth. While the fabric looks “African,” its complex hidden history is connected to 19th-century European colonial activity (the wax-print technique is based on Indonesian batik and was manufactured in Holland and Britain for export to West African markets) and makes it an apt metaphor for the often overlooked or deeply-buried entangled relationship between Africa and Europe.

Telling Tales

Storytelling has been at the heart of image making throughout history. Artists’ tales can reveal how we relate to the world or free our imaginations and lead to new ways of interpreting contemporary circumstances. Because they are born of both experience and fantasy, speak-

ing truths and fictions, artists’ narratives challenge the knowable limits of the world. Contemporary myths, alternatives to the grand narratives of religion, science, or aesthetics, don’t aspire to speak in a commonly understood voice; more often they are formally bound by an individual artist’s rules of depiction but open to question and interpretation. Various degrees of “realism,” oftentimes integrating text, open the door to human tales of humor, anxiety, enchantment, danger, vulnerability, and courage.

Amy Sillman constructs her intimate narratives like scattered fragments of conversation or paragraphs in a long letter. She favors a palette of pastels for her dreamlike juxtapositions of images and events, which result in an unusual fusion of figuration and abstraction. Her art has been described as “simultaneously clumsy and beautiful” with an eccentric yet authentic quality that regularly brings to mind the paintings of Philip Guston. Frequently combining elements of painting and drawing, Sillman creates multiple pictorial spaces and incidents within a single work. With *A Long Drawing* (a sequence of 16 drawings), Sillman explains she “was trying to unpack some images that in a regular painting would have been covered up by layers of



Jenny Scobel, *March*, 2003, oil, graphite, wax on gessoed panel, 71 x 57 cm. Sarah C. Garver Fund.

changes that happen naturally while making a painting...I wanted to 'write out' a drawing in a horizontal format..."⁴

On this page from the project, *Untitled #15 (Twins)*, a procession of image/ideas unfolds frieze-like from left to right, where we encounter three possible sets of "twins"—two stand alongside one another, while a third duo hovers off to the side in a thought bubble-like place. The cartoonishly rendered bodies and emotional faces are simultaneously attached and distant, engaged perhaps in public rituals and private dilemmas. Like the "jumble of thoughts" in our heads, the passages in Sillman's meandering tales rarely cohere but nonetheless add up to an original kind of whole.⁵

Jenny Scobel's virtuoso graphite and gesso drawing, *March*, begs us to ask who this serious, freckled-7face young woman might be. We might wonder how that innocent face could belong to such a glamorously dressed body—her strapless gown and long white gloves looking straight out of a Jackie Kennedy fashion shot. Is she trapped by the expectations of womanhood? Does the cartoon streetscape behind her with its ominous sky offer an escape or spell looming danger? Scobel offers us no definitive tale, no

biographical truth; in fact, she regularly reuses an intriguing face she finds in vintage print media or photographs and meticulously wedges it to different torsos and backgrounds, exploring ways in which alternate meanings are constructed. The somber black-and-white palette lodges this image in the subterranean realm of memory or the nostalgia of black-and-white film and TV. The heightened realism and classic formality of the half-length portrait style, when combined with the more flat and stylized background (culled from 1930-40s cartoons), encourages a sense of tension and estrangement. Subtle washes of oil color and a surface application of poured wax not only formally fuse these disparate aspects of the image, but also result in a drawing that can live in the world of painting.

Susan L. Stoops

Curator of Contemporary Art

Notes

1. Quoted in Holland Cotter, "Art in Review: Paul Noble," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2000, E41.
2. Quoted in *Genomic Art*. www.geneart.org/ovalle.htm
3. Tony Feher in conversation with Adam Weinberg, "An archaeologist of his own life," *Tony Feher* (Annandale-on-Hudson: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 2001), 50.
4. Unpublished statement via e-mail to author, February 2004.
5. Gail Gregg, "Streams of Consciousness," *ARTnews*, April 2001, 120-3.

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