

A study of memory

SU exhibition spotlights four women artists

By Ursula Ehrhardt
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The University Gallery's current exhibition, "Instigators of Memory," brings together four women artists whose works address various aspects of memory.

Ann Weiner's large-scale portraits, for example, explore personal memory, identity and the passage of time by combining multiple, seemingly three-dimensional images of the subject (usually a mature woman) at different stages of her life or in a sequence of actions.

To create these illusions, Weiner uses a technique known as lenticular imaging, in which ribbed plastic sheets (called lenticular sheets) that contain dozens of high-quality cylindrical lenses are positioned in parallel rows over specially prepared images. The lenses reflect the images from varying angles, depending on the viewer's spatial position.

Whereas most lenticular images flip back and forth between only two pictures -- political campaign buttons are an obvious example -- Weiner's images are much more subtle, capturing both a sense of movement and of time. "Carmen," for example, reflects images of a mature woman and a little girl in a white, star-spangled dress. Despite the passage of years, both have the same broad smile.

In contrast, "Lily," who wears a large flowered hat, is caught in a brief sequence of actions, first smiling, then holding a long-stemmed rose between her teeth, and then again smiling, perhaps somewhat sheepishly.

Gail Hallow Watkins' works make connections between popular culture and historic and cultural memory. Done in mixed media on shaped canvases that Watkins characterizes as icons or totems, their worn, abraded surfaces glow with light. Many are shaped like late medieval and early Renaissance altarpieces with gabled or arched tops, and have evocative titles that refer to ancient Egyptian myths or sacred Christian sites. Others, such as "Connect the Dots," are multi-part works whose diamond-shaped units can be arranged in varying configurations.

In contrast to such historic and sacred references, Watkins's imagery is derived from popular culture. She layers images from the Sunday color comics onto the shaped canvas, sanding down the layers to expose underlying images. The result is a subtly-colored, faintly patterned, distressed surface that recalls mural painting.

Elizabeth Austin and Marian Bingham also address the idea of collective or cultural memory. Both artists create dream-like images that evoke the age-old idea of nature as a spiritual realm. Austin's images combine close-up details of plants or tree foliage with views of vast, star-studded skies. Painted on the back of thick Plexiglas in multiple layers that combine acrylic paint with various metallic foils and powders, these images literally sparkle, the light from the stars changing in accordance with the viewer's spatial position.

Bingham's paintings and prints depict horses, primarily as archetypal symbols of nature or various natural forces. Most are done in a simplified style in pale colors that evoke different seasons or times of day. "Grass Horses," a monotype in blues, yellows and blacks, alludes to prehistoric engravings of horses and other animals, in which the animals emerge, in varying degrees of detail, from a welter of curvilinear lines.

This is an excellent show, packed with visually interesting, thought-provoking works in a wide range of styles and media.

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