

Ponder reality at Newport Annual exhibition

By Alexander Castro

Posted Mar 7, 2020 at 5:30 PM

This year the pool of applicants was renovated and expanded to accommodate artists from across New England, with multiple submissions from each.

At 33 years old, the Newport Annual is no longer a twenty-something with something to prove.

Held each year at the Newport Art Museum, the event's formal title, "The Newport Annual Members' Juried Exhibition," was always a mouthful. Now it's been officially pared down to the catchier "Newport Annual."

With the name change you might expect this year's Annual, on view through April 26, to be momentous or spectacular. But on the whole it's a quiet affair, offering a modest and consistent assortment of artworks.

For years the Annual has been comprised of submissions from the museum's own members.

This year the pool of applicants was renovated and expanded to accommodate artists from across New England, with multiple submissions from each.

Out of 287 submitting artists, juror Sharon Matt Atkins of the Brooklyn Museum chose 55 names both familiar and new. As NAM's curator Francine Weiss explained at the opening reception on February 28, Atkins was "focused on hanging a coherent show."

Submissions for juried shows are numerous and wildly varied, and assembling something cool isn't easy. The 81 works on display here are cohesively grouped, though multiple submissions from individual artists add a slight note of redundancy.

So does one expected motif: Atkins writes in the wall text that a "fondness for New England" led her to "[appreciate] seeing many works inspired by the region."

The local flavors are thus represented by a number of beachside roads and gatherings of swimmers. The more interesting fare is more explicitly rooted, like Brittany Marcoux's photos of the since-destroyed cooling towers at Somerset's Brayton Point, their looming shapes glimpsed from the lawns and windows of suburban Swansea.

Atkins shows a preference for materially clever works too, like Jenny Walker's embroideries of Craigslist posts, or Susan Emmerson's "Consumed," made from painted, cut and molded Tyvek. It resembles a scorched lung, as red as fire or blood and just as visceral.

Emmerson introduced herself to me at the reception by commenting on the polyurethane pants I was wearing—not surprising, maybe, given the role of fellow plastic Tyvek in her art.

“I can paint [Tyvek], I can draw on it and...I can melt it and use it as a three-dimensional material,” Emmerson explained. “I have so much fun working with materials.”

“Consumed” aptly demonstrates how materials can heighten intensity. They can also heighten intimacy, as in Elizabeth Duffy’s “Napkin Apparition 2,” one of two pieces which won her Best-in-Show. A napkin embroidered with a prison guard tower, this “Apparition” is part of Duffy’s ongoing effort to bear witness to the ever-snitching eyes of mass surveillance.

“It seems omnipresent,” Duffy said. “So I kind of brought into—I hope—places that are unexpected.”

Asked about the motivation behind this subject matter, Duffy laughs and says, “I guess I’m just paranoid in general, like a lot of people.”

I chuckle and add, “I am too.”

But it’s not just a matter of fearing big brother: Duffy also hopes to point out the “so incredibly, outrageously over the top...culture of incarceration” that exists today.

The highlight of the entire show might be the Wright Gallery, inhabited by the second of Duffy’s winning pieces, a braided rug remade into a shirt.

The entire room has an artifactual and mystical vibe, culminating in a series that runs along the left wall. Linda DiFrenna’s photo of a blindfolded woman suggests an incoming prophecy. It’s followed by Claudia Ruiz Gustafson invoking “Thunder Perfect Mind,” an ancient Gnostic poem, in a tidy photo collage.

“I am the utterance of my own name,” we read, the words balanced by a photo of a ball resting on a wicker chair.

Gustafson’s imagery is arcane, obscure, relaying powers that are hard to describe.

Equally lacking explanation is the suffering some people endure. Next to the rattling spell of “Thunder,” sitting in a corner, is Susan Clinard’s “Odessa’s Last Portrait: Re-imagined.”

Sculpted from wood, ceramic and resin, we see Odessa’s eyes closed, likely asleep, and a dog resting on a rug at her feet. The scene evokes serenity amid hardness, a mood furthered by Clinard’s wall text: “My friend Odessa had a hard life, but probably the worst injustice...was that her body was illegally removed...by greedy cemetery owners” seeking to reuse her burial plot.

And where is Odessa now? Clinard writes that “No one knows where [her] body lies today.” The brutality of life, the utterance of a name, the punitive eyes of law itself—these are a few of the realities we’re invited to ponder in this year’s effective Annual.