



Entertainment & Life

Ties that bind: Two rewarding new exhibits at the Danforth explore family dynamics

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An exciting mix of painters, photographers and sculptors are showing art that evokes the power and poignancy of families in two engaging exhibitions at the Danforth Art Museum at Framingham State University.

FRAMINGHAM - An exciting mix of painters, photographers and sculptors are showing art that evokes the power and poignancy of families in an engaging exhibition at the Danforth Art Museum at Framingham State University.

Like inviting strangers into their homes, the seven artists of “Family Circle” share the joys and conflicts of their families in more than 50 often intriguing works that will prompt visitors to reflect on their own lives.

Curator and interim director Jessica Roscio has organized a rewarding exhibition that presents exciting art about the complex web of people, places and stories that shape our families.

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By creating honest, personal works, these seven artists are nudging viewers to respond to their families by thinking of their own.

Roscio has selected two painters, three photographers and two sculptors whose work recognizes that every “family circle” incorporates traditions, social rituals and stories passed down through the generations that preserves a singular yet evolving identity.

“These artists have used their own families for inspiration to examine all our family histories and ask, ‘Where do we come from? Where are we going?’” Roscio said.

By creating revealing works, these seven artists are nudging viewers to respond to their families by thinking of their own.

“Family dynamics and histories can be a rich source for many artists,” said Roscio, “and we all think about where we came from in relation to who we are today.”

The artists of “Family Circle” include painters Jenny Carpenter and Jasmine Chen, photographers Lee Kilpatrick, Kristen Joy Emack and Claudia Ruiz-Gustafson and sculptors Lisa Barthelson and Mary Morazzi-Henderson.

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Roscio has been managing the Danforth since December when former director Debra Petke retired. FSU, which acquired the museum and incorporated it into the university, has launched a search for Petke's successor.

In a companion exhibit, "Family Fictions, which opened three weeks ago, photographer Liz Albert is using other peoples' slides that she found or bought to explore how imposed "narratives" can define particular times in our lives.

Roscio observed the artists on display create eclectic works that "explore these family stories in both traditional and more unconventional ways through a range of media."

The exhibit is divided into four thematic sections with Lee Kilpatrick and Kristen Joy Emack – of Somerville and Cambridge, respectively - featured in the first, "The Company We Keep" in which the two photographers explore the bonds that bind family members together.

As if photographed by a nosy neighbor, Kilpatrick's striking panoramic images capture families and friends at cookouts, parties or just dozing on the sofa that embody all the comforts and tensions of familiar gatherings.

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Familiar family characters populate his richly-detailed images: blabbers, old coots, antsy kids and some guy inhaling a sandwich.

Mixing sociological observation with family history, Kilpatrick's photos hold a mirror to get-togethers that have been taking place since Neanderthals barbecued mastodon steaks in their caves.

Emack chronicles the bonds growing between her daughter Appaloosa and two relatives in 15 intimate black-and-white photos from her series "Cousins."

Though capturing everyday moments from playing piggyback to admiring their braids, Emack said these images reveal "the brilliance of their communion and kinship."

In just a few photos, visitors can see the three cousins growing up – as individuals and an extended family – from shy smiles in "Swords" to confident self-possession in "Sisters" to mutually-supportive friends in "Flower."

Three very different artists – painter Jenny Carpenter, sculptor Mary Morazzi-Henderson and photographer Claudia Ruiz-Gustafson – show their varied work in the "Visual Storytelling" section which explores how family memories become treasured stories.

A world traveler who has landed in New York, Carpenter uses layered gesso and thinly-applied oil paint to create enigmatic "fairy tales" featuring strange and delicate figures on 8-foot long narrow birch panels.

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Her three dreamlike pieces look as they might have been etched with animal bones in a cave for ritualistic ceremonies. Like the boy looking into a “Rabbit Hole,” more of Carpenter’s haunting pieces deserve to be seen.

Mary Morazzi-Henderson pays homage to her parents by firing stoneware ceramics that signify heartfelt memories about her father’s passion for gardening and her mother’s final days.

Like heirlooms that symbolize a cherished legacy, her three pieces embody deeply personal stories shared with others through her labor-intensive handiwork.

A sort of artistic enchantress, Claudia Ruiz-Gustafson recounts her journey from Peru to the U.S. through 31 evocative photos and 11 texts that she calls her “Historias Fragmentadas,” or “Fragmented Stories.”

Reminiscent of the magical realism of Latin American authors, the Framingham-based artist casts a supernatural aura on her stories illustrated by vintage photos of her homeland, torn portraits of a dark-eyed beauty and a haunting image of a woman in white next to a tree bearing Jesus’ face.

Boldly ambitious, Ruiz-Gustafson infuses her own story with signs and symbols that link her past and present to create a personal mythology that opens her inner life to viewers – if they dare look.

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Jasmine Chen paints gorgeous oil and acrylic narratives of her family history in two countries, growing up in China and coming of age in the U.S.

Roscio observed that “There’s no right side up” in her vivid dream-like scenes of faces swirling in a sea of colors.

Like chameleon memories, Chen’s images combine figurative and abstract elements as if to reconcile the past and present worlds she occupies.

Lisa Barthelson assembles her “found object sculptures” from castoff toys, clothing, string and chicken wire to create literal family circles.

Located in “The Shape of Things” section, the Rutland artist’s funky work makes serious points about nostalgia and memory in a throw-away culture.

“Happy families are all alike,” the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy once wrote, “Every unhappy family is unhappy in their own way.”

The artists of “Family Circle” might reply, “Come and see yourself in our work. You’ll be happy you did.”

Chris Bergeron is a freelance writer. Follow us on Twitter [@WickedLocalArts](#) and like our [Wicked Local Arts Facebook page](#).