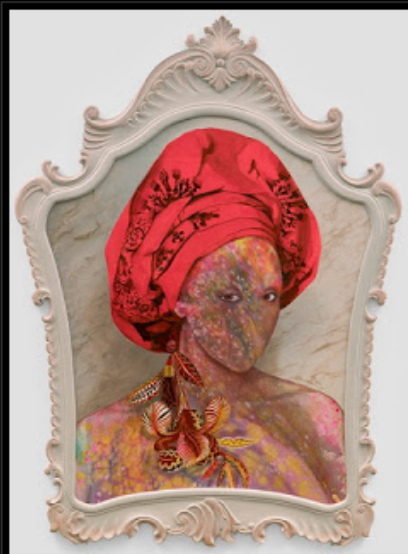


GET VISUAL

THINGS SEEN AND HEARD ON THE CAPITAL REGION ART SCENE AND BEYOND

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2019

Embody at Mandeville Gallery



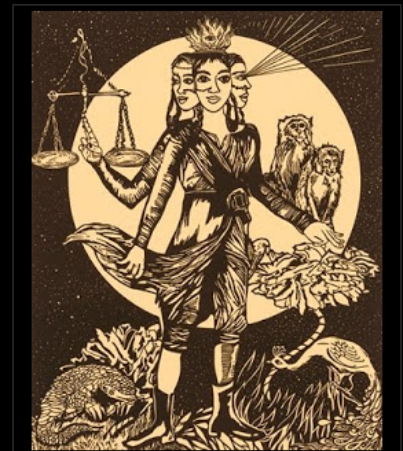
Firelei Baez - *given the ground (the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it)*
acrylic and oil on canvas

There's always a mystery to strong group shows - does the curator start with a theme and then find artists that fit it, or does she start with some art she likes, and then discover the theme as it emerges? At shows like this I find myself asking, what do these artists have in common, and what brought them together? Is it taste? Meaning? Technique?

In the case of *EMBODY*, an outstanding exhibition on view at Union College's Mandeville Gallery through Jan. 19, curator Julie Lohnes has provided a number of intriguing threads to follow - and though I can't claim to have unraveled them all, it's great fun to try. She has also answered the origin question in a short essay at the front of a handsome catalog produced for the show (which the gallery provides free to visitors) - but where's the fun in that?

Going on with my search, I note that many of the ten included artists are from far-flung places - Haiti, Japan, Nigeria, Dominican Republic, and Iran among them - while those from the U.S. seem to have significant non-European ethnic ties: A strong indicator that the unifying principle of the show relates to expression of ethnic identity.

As the title implies, the works in *EMBODY* are all figurative, but the treatment of the human figure varies widely here, as does the range of techniques applied, from painting and fabric sculpture to drawing and several forms of printmaking. Still, it all pulls together, maintaining equilibrium. One key to this delicate balance is that the overall quality of the work in the show is very high (though not perfectly consistent - a couple of pieces didn't quite hold up for me). That such a diversity of forms doesn't devolve into a mishmash is a credit to Lohnes' sharp curatorial vision. This consistency even stretches across



Chitra Ganesh - *Sultana's Dream: Justice is Virtue, linocut*

shows - I recall, for example, one of the first shows she produced at the Mandeville was a 2014 solo by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, who would have fit quite cleanly into this group.

Upon careful viewing, it becomes apparent that collage is the unifying element among this disparate swath of artists, even if most are not actually creating collages at all. The layering of images and conjunction of parts is more direct in some works, more subtle in others, but it's there, always. At the same time, there are, in equal parts, extremely vivid colors (especially in paintings by Amir H. Fallah, Firelei Baez and Didier William, in digital collages by Stacey Robinson, and in mixed-media prints by Saya Woolfalk) and superbly managed monochromes (in linocuts by Chitra Ganesh, mixed-media drawing by Simonette Quamina, and lithographs by Toyin Ojih Odutola). Being partial to neither, I enjoyed it all.



Perhaps the most difficult work in the show to grasp is a set of fabric sculptures by aricoco (Ari Tabei). These wearable pieces seem to want to be part of a performance, rather than exhibited in static poses. It was also terribly difficult to resist touching their multifarious textures and fasteners. Woolfalk's mixed-media digital prints struck me as the most accessible, with their seductively contemporary palette and smooth inkjet surfaces. The most compelling pieces in the show for me were two monumental drawings by Quamina that include torn assemblage and raw, textural graphite rubbings (a technique we all know from childhood that's not often seen in fine art). I also got a kick out of Robinson's slick Afrofuturist collages, which most literally exemplify the curator's stated source of inspiration for assembling this collection of artists.

In all, it's a hugely pleasurable and engrossing exhibition that's sure to compel a couple of good trips around the Mandeville's unique circular gallery space, housed inside an extraordinary building at the center of campus, the Nott Memorial.

- David Brickman

