



ENTERTAINMENT

# 'Embody' exhibit at Mandeville Gallery, Union College

Artists take oblique approach to depicting human body

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aricoco Ari Tabei, Dress for Today #7, The Human in the Ant's Skin, 2019. Mixed media. (Detail 2) Photo Wm Jaeger

The 10 artists in "Embody," chosen partly for the global range of their cultural backgrounds, each attack, aesthetically, the one thing they have in common: the human body. Digital collage, monotype, painting and even a post-performance costume mark the spread of approaches.

The actual curatorial point of convergence seems to be a fascinating avoidance of clarity. The bodies — and the identities attached to them — are given room for something more and other than what meets the eye. And more than the usual privileged expectations of the viewer. Which leads to a second unifying precept: all the works are somehow segmented and pieced together. They are either literal collages and assemblages, or they become the same thing conceptually.

So "Embody" circles around the airy second floor Mandeville gallery in the Nott Memorial with surprising beauty. It's a great, compact show. It teases and feints. The whole and the individual pieces equally avoid easy conclusions. There is, no doubt, a furtive universal social message between the lines overall, but within each artist's approach we find very individual voices.

"Between Mary Jane's shrouded thoughts," a monoprint with graphite drawing by Simonette Quamina, shrouds the tumbling subject's face so that a viewer is disoriented. And maybe lost in reverie, too, as the title might suggest. The rich monochromatic textures alone command attention, and one clear gesture, a finger pointing, gives force to the subject's repose.

Ari Tabei, a Japanese artist who goes by the name aricoco, has created a costume of tweeds and furs and sewn materials, including clear plastic, to disguise herself as "an insect queen," meant to contrast to her own powerlessness. This, of course, you have to read in her statement. What remains in the gallery is the costume, as a vestige of this other idea. The furs stand almost inhabited, and one plasticky object is like a greatly enlarged eye of a fly, each little segment containing materials seen, or acquired, from the real world.

The works go on in this manner, deliberately perplexing but never in a condescending way. We are led along with enough coordinates to enter and even understand what is being said. Some of the works are partly representational experiments around depictions of the body. Saya Woolfalk's mixed-media, part inkjet works are colorful fantasy figures, almost straight from science fiction. Stacey Robinson's more openly collaged figures are actually out in space, with cosmic Afrofuturist symbolism.

Iranian-American Amir H. Fallah works in a painterly manner that fractures more earthly space much as a collage artist might. The central figure in "The Sun, The Moon, and The Truth" seems to be isolated and at peace, largely shrouded, face fully hidden, but with both legs uncovered in a casual way to imply she is fully inside a safe inner space. Fallah's other works also use body language to complicate what we see, without

resorting to reading the subject's hidden facial expressions. Pouring milk and gesturing with a candle take on escalating meaning.

And escalating mystery. The selection of artists (and selection of works) seems unusually deft and insightful, and credit goes to curator Julie Lohnes for taking a basically simple theme and making it rise above. There are implications here that would take pages to dig into, such as the gorgeous and integral framing around paintings of partially removed faces by Firelei Báez, of the Dominican Republic. Or the seeming inclusion of historical elements in collaged portraits by David Shrobe that are on one level conventional, but that also show, like the exhibition itself, all the formal signs of multilayered, personally invested creation.

*William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.*