

Women's artist talk on 'Recurrence' exhibit

By Jenna Swartz - Apr 14, 2016

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On Jan. 2, the Mandeville Gallery opened the provocative and electric exhibit "Recurrence" in the Nott Memorial. Artists Simone Meltesen, Karen Schiff, Sam Vernon and Rachel Wren focus on the idea of feminism in the visual arts and how these ideas are represented.

These four incredible painters held a women's artist talk on April 6, to discuss the impact of the feminist art movement on their pieces.

The works are rather large, ranging from colored pencil and watercolor on paper, to acrylic on unprimed linen. At first glance it's difficult to find the underlying elements that connects these works.

Everything seems disorderly, unconnected, even messy. However, after closer examination, one can sense the common rhythm that unites all of these paintings.

Each piece reveals its meaning through repetition; it is through the duplication of color, shapes, objects, patterns, and form that each message is portrayed.

What is so intriguing about this exhibit is that each artist portrays their style of painting in a wide variety of ways. Some of the works that I thought were particularly interesting were those of artist Simon Meltesen.

Meltesen, born and raised in San Fransisco, recently graduated with an M.F.A. in painting from Hunter College in New York City. She explores lesbian feminist formalism through her colorful and neat paintings of patches of plaid.

As stated by Meltesen herself, plaid flannel is the staple of lesbian fashion, functioning as a joke within the lesbian community while also raising eyebrows amongst straight women.

She also states that the empty space formed by plaid provokes a sense of absence, which is interpreted as the "lesbian subject" that is often theorized as off-limits.

However, one could focus on the solid squares that the intersecting lines make, rather than the empty spaces. Perhaps these dark squares depict the evident voices of the lesbian feminist community, willing to be heard. Thus her paintings are layered with the annunciations of mockery and confidence.

Another extremely interesting artist was Karen Schiff who owns a studio in Brooklyn, NY and graduated from Tufts University in Boston with an M.F.A. in studio art.

The artist Agnes Martin largely inspired her artwork. When discussing her paintings, Schiff openly explained her (and Martin's) conflict with being given the categorization of a female artist as "when does being identified as a woman artist trump being identified with another kind of artist."

This struggle against being given a concrete label drove both Martin and Schiff's work towards being completely unique and unable to be put into any other category.

Schiff spoke about her passion for wanting her artwork to be able to stand on its own without being confined to any other similar standards.

She desired for her own place, to be viewed as an individual and not be put into a specific category along with other artists.

All of her paintings attempt to disconcert the viewer by giving them no solid focal point. She described her paintings as "dizzying," which represent her focus on the expansion of space, representing movement giving her pieces an almost magical quality.

These are just two examples of artists who utilize repetitious color, form and shape to elicit feelings of presence, disorderliness and intensity. Their works urge viewers to not only enjoy the aesthetic, but to also view the works deeper.

The artists embed these messages within these recurring patterns, urging the viewer to look through a matrix to contemplate the true meaning of the piece.