

WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

Lesley Dill installation and 'Art on Paper' worth the trip

Tom Patterson

November 09, 2014

Winston-Salem Journal



Two of the most stimulating exhibitions the Triad has seen this year are currently at Greensboro's Weatherspoon Art Museum. One is a solo exhibition by Lesley Dill, a New York artist, and the other is an international group show of works on paper. On view into early next month, they're both so content-rich and thought-provoking that it's easy to spend an entire afternoon contemplating them. If you care about art, don't miss them.

Several of Dill's pieces incorporating text and photography are in the Weatherspoon's collection and have previously been featured in group exhibitions at the museum. She had a 16-month residency and related show at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in 2000 and 2001. Her ambitious project at SECCA ("Tongues on Fire: Visions and Ecstasy") was based on local people's accounts of spontaneous visionary experiences. It set her on the thematic track that she has continued to explore in her subsequent work up to and including "Faith & the Devil," her immersive installation in the Weatherspoon's Falk Gallery.

Dill has transformed the gallery into a spiritually charged, language-saturated environment in which viewers are surrounded on all sides by evocative text and symbolic imagery painted on seven floor-to-ceiling canvas banners. The center of the gallery, meanwhile, is occupied by a towering, 8-foot-tall figure with a cruciform head spilling forth a mass of white-fabric dreadlocks reminiscent of the snakes on Medusa's head.

Like the surrounding walls, "Big Gal Faith" — as Dill calls this imposing mixed-media sculpture — is densely clad in words and phrases on white fabric. Some are associated with ecstasy, spiritual uplift and regenerative power, while others conjure fear, horror and aggression. They're imprinted on narrow scrolls streaming down the length of her body and wound around her long, regal skirt, which spills out to cover much of the gallery's floor.

Multicolored but predominantly black letters in a scrambled assortment of antique typographical styles lend visual interest to these texts, which are excerpted from works by poets and other literary artists, including John Donne, Pablo Neruda and Franz Kafka. They're carefully chosen to highlight the human capacities for exalted feelings and compassionate action on the one hand, and for extreme cruelty, violence and brutality on the other.

These and other words — including the spoken testimony of contemporary war refugees — are rendered in the same varied typographical format on the wall banners, with key phrases highlighted in large type legible from across the room. Some phrases — such as Neruda's "Drunk with the great starry void" and Kafka's "Faith like a Guillotine as heavy as light" — are repeated multiple times like incantations, and others are arranged to form starbursts and spirals.

The texts are interspersed with drawings based largely on iconic figures representing death, transcendence and transfiguration, borrowed from illustrations in centuries-old texts and more contemporary sources. Among them are skeletons, saints and several images of the devil, the counterpart to the installation's central personification of faith.

Dill's own representation of the devil — Lucifer, as he's called in Dill's notes on the installation — is a disarmingly slight, androgynous sculptural figure resembling a generic clothing dummy from the children's section of a department store. Standing unobtrusively off to one side of the gallery, he's naked except for the texts imprinted directly onto his simulated skin, from head to toe. Again, these texts emphasize contrasting aspects of human character and experience.

Little Lucifer is dwarfed by Big Gal Faith, and the discrepancy in scale is a fitting if obvious metaphor for faith's power to overcome evil. That relationship is fundamental to the installation's larger message, although Dill doesn't oversimplify it. By densely interspersing these contrasting texts and images throughout the piece — to overwhelming effect — she acknowledges the complexity of these issues and the struggles any of us are liable to undergo in navigating them.

In related comments published on her website, Dill writes, "The word 'faith' is in itself a conflict. Inside it is a tension between equa-

nimity and fear of horrors, whether from the outside world or the interior mental world. Faith is an active word, as it requires a taking on of evil in an attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible.”

Tradition of the new

Upstairs in the Weatherspoon’s 5,000-square-foot main gallery is the 43rd installment of “Art on Paper,” a tradition since 1965. These shows started as annual affairs and were recently switched to a biennial schedule. In addition to showcasing outstanding examples of paper-based art on a one-time basis, these exhibitions have provided opportunities for the Weatherspoon’s staff to cherry-pick works for acquisition through a special fund designated for art on paper. It’s called the Dillard Collection and includes about 600 works.

This rendition of “Art on Paper” is more of a curated exhibition than many of its predecessors, which have tended to maximize the number of artists and sampled art styles. This time Xandra Eden, the museum’s exhibitions curator, invited a select group of artists to submit works, resulting in a more focused exhibition representing 34 artists — not nearly as many as in some previous “Art on Paper” shows. Most of these emerging and established artists have multiple works in the show — rarely the case in those previous exhibitions.

Two portable walls roughly subdivide the gallery in half, with one side devoted largely to hyper-detailed and/or highly graphic works, and the other mainly to more loosely expressionistic and/or abstract pieces. Each half of the room has its own centerpiece in the form of a large sculptural installation.

One of these centerpieces is Margaret Griffith’s “Vertigo,” a group of intricately hand-cut paper forms, alternately black and white, suspended from the high ceiling and hanging loosely down onto the floor. Combining right-angular frames with decorative scrollwork, these forms suggest collapsed versions of painted wrought-iron gates, fences or porch railings.

Highlights among the other works on the same side of the gallery are Kako Ueda’s two surrealistic cutout-paper pieces; Nancy Blum’s panoramic drawing of mushrooms and flowers; Robert Weins’ full-scale drawing of a rotting tree trunk; John Rappleye’s drawings of hybrid figures combining multiple species; and elin o’Hara slavick’s dadaesque collages critiquing war and capitalism. Presiding over the other half of the gallery is Myung Gyun You’s “The Floating World,” a towering configuration of dark-stained newspaper pages wadded up and densely glommed onto a hidden armature to create a loose, podlike form vaguely resembling a funnel cloud.

Among other noteworthy pieces on the same side of the gallery are a big, woven screen of long, rainbow-colored paper strips by Joell Baxter; M.J. O’Brien’s large drawing composed of multicolored, freehanded dots; Glen Kaino’s quilt-like compositions of sandpaper patches; Leah Sobsey’s “Swarm” of cutout blue butterflies; and J.C. Lenachan’s white-chalk sketches of soldiers, weapons and other war-related imagery surrounded by scrawled, hard-to-read texts that hint at obsessive ranting.