

Montclair Art Museum opens ambitious '90s art exhibition, 'Come As You Are'

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Artistically, decades don't often fall into tidy 10-year intervals. When we talk about '60s culture, for instance, we're really talking about the time period from the assassination of Kennedy (1963) to the resignation of Nixon (1974).

So it is with the '90s, which Alexandra Schwartz, the Montclair Art Museum's curator of contemporary art, defines as 1989-2001 for the purposes of the museum's ambitious new exhibition, "Come As You Are: Art of the 1990s." The museum calls it "the first major museum survey to examine the art of this pivotal decade in its historical context." Some 65 works by 45 artists are displayed, including installations, paintings, sculptures, drawing, photography, video and more.

Most museum exhibitions, of course, are devoted to material that has been displayed many times before, in many different ways. This one has the benefit of opening up a whole new world to museum-goers who may not have spent a lot of time looking at — and thinking about — art so recent.

In the case of Sharon Lockhart's large photo print, "Untitled" (pictured above), the anonymity of the setting and the sense of vague uneasiness it suggests make it a quintessentially '90s image. This could be a hotel room in any city in the world; perhaps because of that, the person pictured looks lost.

Glenn Kaino's "The Siege Perilous" is basically an office chair that spins in place so rapidly you could almost get dizzy watching it. It's the kind of fancy ergonomic chair you might see at an Internet start-up, and suggests the way the internet can suck its users in, like a kind of virtual vortex.

Other works include Aziz + Cucher's "Man With a Computer" (right), in which a muscular but desexualized man hold a computer and points, and if showing the way to the future; Prema Murthy's "Bindi Girl," an Internet work exploring stereotypes of Indian women; and Mark Dion's "Department of Marine Animal Identification of the City of San Francisco" (see below), an installation that shows an entire messy office, as if its occupants had just stepped out for a coffee break.

The well-chosen title of the exhibition, of course, comes from the 1992 Nirvana song, and is evocative of time in which artists were boldly stepping forward to express the realities of their lives, and the world they lived in.

It's harder, in some ways, to sum up the recent past than the more distant past, but this exhibition is a sensible, and very entertaining, start.

"Come As You Are: Art of the 1990s" is at the Montclair Art Museum through May 17.

