

## The Philadelphia Inquirer

### Galleries: Woodmere show focuses on contemporary art

By Edith Newhall, For The Inquirer

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Not so long ago, the Woodmere Art Museum's annual juried exhibition was ruled by landscape and figure paintings and evocative photographs of Manayunk and the Wissahickon. The show was also a sprawling, democratic affair that took up most of the museum. You couldn't help but think that the outside jurors hired by the museum threw up their hands at the sheer volume of submissions and opted to pack the galleries rather than parse the good from the mediocre.

No more.

Last year's 71st annual exhibition clearly reflected the preferences of its juror, figurative painter and PAFA professor Alex Kanevsky, who also pared it to 46 artists. There was representational work (including his own), but the show was anything but conventional.

This year's exhibition makes an even more obvious break with its past.

The works of the 52 artists in "In Front of Strangers, I Sing" were selected specifically to illustrate strains of contemporary art as currently practiced in Philadelphia. Moreover, the two jurors, painters and Tyler School of Art professors Dona Nelson and **Rubens Ghenov** actively sought art of a conceptual bent, something new to the annual.



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The show's point is made right away. Almost every work takes its medium in a new direction.

It opens, as Kanevsky's did, in the first gallery with works by its jurors. One, by Nelson, is a large abstract of purples and yellows on raw canvas inspired by a view of her Nebraska childhood home. (She paints on the fronts and backs of her paintings, intending the paint on the back to seep through.) Several others are by Ghenov, an Argentine transplant who makes mash-ups of geometric abstraction and '70s-seeming pop-culture images.

But some of their selected artists also are in this gallery. My eyes went to the back wall, covered by Frank Bramblett's *Accomplished*, 324 pieces of note paper in various Post-It colors arranged in a grid, each a daily to-do list of tasks that Bramblett wrote (and accomplished) between 2000 and 2013. Though I was not entirely surprised to discover it was his (I saw a smaller but similarly obsessive wall installation of his at *Tiger Strikes Asteroid* last June), I was unprepared for its vast scale, having only known his paintings on canvas before last summer.

A low, linear sculpture of welded steel rods by Timothy Belknap is positioned close to Bramblett's wall, heightening the quirkiness of both. Ryan McCartney's carved-wood chair, its seat a pedestal for carved-wood facsimiles of objects (feathers, eggs, a skull), occupies the room's center like a three-dimensional still life.

Works in the Woodmere's two-story rotunda gallery have less visual impact individually. That may be because the architecture affords a view of too many at once, but I noticed that a lot of the pieces share the same range of colors and shades (much gray). There's a missed opportunity for large sculpture in this room, too. A second piece by Belknap, entirely different from his riff on modernist sculpture (and, I assume, deliberately so) - a mechanized figure of an elderly man tapping his foot disapprovingly at regular intervals - is entertaining, but a really large floor sculpture or installation would have added drama to this vacuum of a space (and no, the grand piano that is, unfortunately, a fixture of this gallery, doesn't cut it).

As in any large show of this kind, a viewer's attention is engaged by art that uses color, texture, and form in a personal, idiosyncratic way; that pushes the limits of a medium to an extreme; or that plays with scale in an unexpected manner. On the walls, Nelson and Ghenov have put works together so they syncopate, a good antidote to the monotone color here. (Still, some of the blandest-colored pieces manage to pop out, such as Sarah Roche's drippy expressionistic oil painting of a roiling sky and ocean, *Thunderstorm Seaside Park*, which defies the anachronistic "seascape" label, and Matt Neff's digital print on aluminum, *Untitled*, which looks like the interior of a studio with minimalist paintings in it but is likely invented.)

Sometimes, a seemingly conventional painting sneaks in, but with a weird edge that separates it from the pack, as in Nathan Zeidman's *6:06*, a painterly painting of a wall clock that has a kitschy painting of a sunset harbor scene inside it, and Catherine Mulligan's

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almost-photorealist oils of a liquor store and a Family Dollar store whose distressed surfaces make them look as if they were retrieved from a dumpster. Anne Canfield's oil painting of a sunlit building in a seemingly tropical locale, *Good Is What Pleases*, probably borrows its flatness from early Renaissance painting and surreal affect from De Chirico, but looks utterly of its own time, a dark J.G. Ballard vision-turned-fairy tale.

What the show lacks in heat - even an Anthony Campuzano work on paper, *Live Show*, has an uncharacteristically elegiac character - is compensated for by the inclusion of Mark Martinez's *Minor Tilt with Signs*, an unpainted, wall-mounted, wood structure that looks like part of a new house construction beneath which he's mounted colorful signs he has found on walks through his North Philly neighborhood and manipulated with colored tape.

Despite occasional shortcomings, this provocative show far outdoes its predecessors in every way. The Woodmere can never be the Whitney, but it's clear that it can continue a deeper excavation of this city's contemporary art scene in future annuals.

Woodmere Art Museum, 9201 Germantown Ave., [www.woodmereartmuseum.org](http://www.woodmereartmuseum.org), 215-247-0476. Through Sept. 1.

"Art" by Edward J. Sozanski and "Galleries" by Edith Newhall appear on alternating Sundays.