

Seattle's Henry Art Gallery plays mix 'n' match with 'Vortexhibition Polyphonica'

"Vortexhibition Polyphonica," is a Henry Art Gallery exhibit of 100 pieces drawn from the Seattle museum's permanent collection — including works by Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Cindy Sherman and William Hogarth. The exhibition runs through March 2011.

By **Michael Upchurch**
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You might expect to find works by Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Gary Hill, John Cage and Imogen Cunningham in the Henry Art Gallery's permanent collection. They're all artists with strong Seattle connections.

But Cindy Sherman, Edward Weston, William Hogarth, Hiroshige, Robert Longo, Gerhard Richter and Christian Dior?

These artists and dozens of others — some lesser known, but equally talented — are part of a vast new show at the Henry that, in varying incarnations, will run through March 2011.

"Vortexhibition Polyphonica" finds the museum rummaging through its attic — actually, its underground storage rooms — to come up with a mix and match of items that surprised even associate curator Sara Krajewski as she assembled the show.

The Henry's permanent collection, she notes, is "a diverse beast." It holds late 19th- and early 20th-century paintings donated by Horace C. Henry when he founded the museum in 1927. It has a strong textile and costume collection transferred to the museum when the University of Washington merged the collections of its Drama and Home Economics departments in 1982.

The museum is best known these days for its impressive photography and contemporary art holdings.

Big collection

All in all, there are 24,000 pieces in the permanent collection. "Vortexhibition Polyphonica" displays roughly 100 of them. Krajewski's challenge was to draw connections between all the different subcollections.

"I hit upon this idea of having works of art act as hubs," Krajewski recalls, "around which a group of works could sort of revolve or orbit as a constellation."

That was the concept. But a more visceral impulse guided some choices: "It was like: 'Oh, how do we get this up on view? It's such a spectacular piece.'"

Her enthusiasm for particular artworks and obvious delight in her compare-and-contrast arrangements in the gallery are palpable to anyone walking through "Vortexhibition Polyphonica."

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[enlarge](#) HENRY ART GALLERY / WILLIAM AND RUTH TRUE
 E.V. Day's "Cherry Bomb Vortex" (2002) features an exploding red-sequin cocktail dress.

Three groups

This is the first Henry show to draw on the museum's whole collection since 2005's chronologically staged "150 Works of Art." Krajewski, in this "sequel" to "150," has arranged the artworks in a more associative manner, grouping them loosely under three headings: "Transform," "Suspend" and "Mixing Messages."

E.V. Day's "Cherry Bomb Vortex" — a red, sequined cocktail dress "exploded" to smithereens — greets you at the exhibit entrance. It's the "hub" work for "Transform" and it's a stunner.

Its shreds of fabric on monofilament form a bright whirlwind expanding from floor to ceiling.

The fact that Day's piece was a dress — albeit an atomized dress — naturally connected it to the Henry's costume holdings.

Sitting kitty-corner from it is a black Merry Widow corset from the 1950s intended to shape the female form as rigidly as "Cherry Bomb Vortex" blows it apart. The two pieces exist in compelling polar opposition to each other.

The metamorphosis in Day's piece suggested other connective possibilities as well, Krajewski says. Cindy Sherman's "Untitled" (1990), in which Sherman transforms herself into a spiky-haired, pregnant urchin with something seriously disturbing going on with her navel, is one of them.

Just down the wall from Sherman are two striking photographs by Canadian artist Janieta Eyre: "Twin Manicurists" and "Twins Modeling Identical Leech Gowns" (both from 1996).

"Janieta Eyre has created this very elaborate story about herself and her fictional twin," Krajewski notes. "So it has a kind of narrative through-line that's a little bit different than Cindy Sherman's, where costuming is specific for one image or one series of works. But it definitely picks up on this thread of dressing up for the camera, presenting oneself in different kinds of costumes and different identities."

On the opposite wall, two older photographs explore transformations of a different type. The sensual surfaces of Edward Weston's "Pepper" (1930) suggest the contours of a seated female nude facing away from the camera.

Next to it, Imogen Cunningham's "Triangles" (1928) takes an actual female nude and finds a pleasingly abstract geometry in her seated shape.

Time change

Krajewski's second category, "Suspend," is anchored by Paul Kos' "Not If, But When" (1990), an assemblage of cuckoo clocks with hammers and sickles hanging from them. There are no hands on the clockfaces, but there *are* actual cuckoos bursting out of them at irregular intervals.

The work alludes to communism's inevitable fall that, in 1990, was still unpredictable in its precise timing.

Other pieces in "Suspend" investigate the suspension of time itself. Harold Eugene Edgerton's "Bullet Through the Apple" (1964) uses "rapid flashes of light from an electron stroboscope" to freeze an image of a bullet in flight: a sight invisible to the naked eye.

At the opposite end of the time-suspension spectrum is "Four Geostationary Satellites Above the Sierra Nevada" (2007) by Trevor Paglen, described as an "experimental geographer, conceptual artist, and landscape photographer."

The long time exposure of Paglen's camera is one kind of suspension at play in the photograph. Another is the suspension of disbelief required of viewers, if they're to credit the image with being what Paglen says it is, in an age when such imagery is easily digitally manipulated.

Voice and vision

"Mixing Messages" is Krajewski's final chosen category, and it introduces a verbal element into visual artworks. Gary Hill's "Wall Piece" (2000), which has pride of place here, is a case in point. As Hill, on video, hurls himself against a wall, a strobe flash catches him in midair as he recites text (one word per flash). An added layer of strobe activity comes from a real strobe flashing on an off beat to the video. Light, movement and utterance fuse into one jarring, percussive experience.

The message is more comically "mixed" in Clayton George Bailey's "Bigfoot (Sasquatch) skeleton" (1972), a hand-built bone-china extravaganza on a bed of mulch. Here, Bailey's "documentation" deliberately confuses fact and myth, scientific research and aesthetic high jinks.

An excellent Web site (vortexhibitionpolyphonica.wordpress.com) accompanies "Vortexhibition Polyphonica." There, viewers can submit comments or questions, and also find links to Hill's discussion of "Wall Piece," photographer Eyre's elaborate twins saga or the nutty world of Bailey, whose Web site is a work of art unto itself.

"We wanted to, in the spirit of the polyphonic, encourage some other voices outside of the staff and our researchers and curators," Krajewski says.

"Vortexhibition Polyphonica" stays in its present configuration through the end of January, when chief curator Elizabeth A. Brown steps in with additions, subtractions and reconfigurations.

This conjures images of dueling curators protesting at changes being made to their show. But Krajewski, with a smile, shakes her head at the thought: "I don't think so; I'm kind of curious to see how it will go."

A third transformation is planned for May, when the UW Art School MFA exhibit is incorporated into the show, replacing half the current lineup.

And sometime during the summer, actual artists — Seattle's mischief-making trio SuttonBeresCuller — will stage an "an intervention into the space."

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