

"CONTENDER" BY SUZAN GLOBUS SHIMMERS AND MESMERIZES LIKE A JEWEL-LIKE TREASURE."

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A juried exhibition is a funny beast, a hybrid exhibition that reminds me of the well-known cliché about the horse designed by a committee that ends up looking like a camel. It is hard enough to design the horse correctly or to curate a show with intelligence, but a juried show takes so much control out of the hands of the person who picks the work.

At first glance, the 61st Chautauqua Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art seems like an odd mixture of work that has no unifying theme or aesthetic. That is the nature of a juried show. The juror picks the show from work submitted through the open call; in other words, anyone can submit a work for consideration, and the juror is presented with a random group of works to judge. This year's brave soul is Sharon Loudon, who is an artist, educator, advocate for artists, and editor of the Living and Sustaining a Creative Life series of books. She looked at around 400 works by 145 artists. In the end, she chose works by 26 artists that she felt revolved around three concepts: color, identity and oddity. The result is a disparate group of work that can seem confusing but that gives each viewer the freedom to examine every work on its own merits rather than as part of a greater whole.

As such, it differs significantly from the other shows on view at Chautauqua. "Force of Nature" features the landscape paintings of a married couple who went against the grain of mainstream art in the second half of the 20th century. Organized by Don Kimes, who leaves Chautauqua after many years of shaping the visual arts programs, the show is an homage to his mentors and friends. "Ties That Bind" was curated by Erika Diamond, assistant director of galleries, who followed her own interest and career in fiber art with work that resembled lace patterns. Coming from different mediums, each work showed the importance of pattern in how we organize our world. "Masters of Craft," curated by Judy Barie, the Susan and Jack Turben Director of Galleries, is a tight survey of craft techniques ranging from ceramics and glass to tapestries and metalwork. Barie's other show, "ROY G BIV," as the name indicates, includes artists whose work is based on color. Every work in each of these shows was chosen to be part of a group conversation about a particular topic.

The juror's choice, however, is based on her own opinion about art and reflects her personal preferences. Each juror proceeds in her own way, with some preferring to select a tight show that, for example, only includes portraits or work that relates to a specific site or point in history. Others try to include as many approaches and techniques as possible to show the diversity within contemporary art. Some jurors feel that they want to include one work by every artist to be equitable, while others feel that multiple works by a single artist give a needed depth.

I tend to look at a show like this in a somewhat arbitrary way. I think it a success if I find five works that intrigue me. (I have to say that I judge major international shows like the "Venice Biennale" or the "Carnegie International" in the same way, hoping to find at least five artists whose work grabs my attention.) Using that criterion, this show is a success, so I am offering, in no particular order, my shortlist of works from this show that I think deserve more attention.

One and two are small, unassuming paintings that seemed to contain ideas bigger than their small scale. Diane DeLarme's "Smokestack" (mixed media on paper and board that might look better as a framed work) walks that fascinating line between abstraction and representation. Composed of blocky shapes that loosely remind us of an industrial scene but without the smoke, this piece also works as a study of color. Sara Weininger's "Dresser Drawer" (oil on panel) suggests a general narrative without providing specific details. The sketchy forms of the dresser and lamp are set against a mottled pink bedroom, creating a stage so the viewer has to provide the characters and the action. The beauty of these two works is that neither ever totally coalesces into a concrete world, never settles into the literal.

Three is another small work, again a painting. "Contender" by Susan Globus (acrylic and italic on bark) shimmers and mesmerizes like a jewel-like treasure. The surface of the bark, a very ordinary object probably discarded from a mature tree, is transformed with a metallic sheen. Simultaneously nature and artifice, it offers an illusion of mystery and wonder.

Four and five are more paintings. The two works are by Danielle Muzina (both collage and oil on panel). Following what has become a theme of my own making for this show, there is an almost murky eeriness in these works. Nothing seems solid or anchored in recognizable space. Objects emerge from dark backgrounds, especially in "Never." The questions raised are many, with just hints about a shadowy narrative that intrigues and leaves us wanting more.

Six, the last piece on my list, is the boldest work in the show. "I Am Flower (Power Mask) Red, Yellow, and White" demands attention, even though its title seems overly long. Two groups of flowers are arranged symmetrically in mirror images on the left and right sides of the inky black background. The reference to a mask in the title gives an idea of a performance prop, much like an African mask that becomes alive only through ritual. Although that is obviously not the case here, the reference increases the intensity factor. The color contrasts and rigid placement draw the eye and make us wonder about technique. Supposedly made using an iPhone, the piece needs more of a description of its medium than "photo composition."

After viewing the exhibition, I did find my five works in the show that I liked, so I have to say that Loudon did her job. Without a common theme, style, or medium, as in the other shows at Chautauqua, we rely on the juror's judgment. We assume that without these organizational constraints, the decisions are made based on quality, a thing that we believe can be defined. But there is no such thing as an objective eye, and all decisions are based on a person's experience, interests, and even biases and prejudices. In reality, it is enough to say that something about each work in this show caught the eye of Sharon Loudon. And we have to be satisfied with that. There is something for everyone, so even if some pieces raise eyebrows in confusion, others raise them in delight and perhaps even surprise. Shows like this show the vitality and diversity of the arts in our world and the importance of them in the ever-changing intellectual and cultural environment of Chautauqua.

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