

State Art Collection: Contemporary Conversations

by Eleanor Heartney

The State Art Collection is one of South Carolina's cultural jewels. Established in 1967 as a modest assembly of paintings and sculptures largely drawn from academic circles, it has grown to encompass 448 works by 277 artists – and counting. It represents media ranging from painting and sculpture to works realized in clay, fabric, video, film, photography, assemblage, installation and graphics – all by artists who live or used to live in South Carolina. As one of the most extensive compilation of works by the state's artists, the collection offers a glimpse of a lively artistic community whose work reflects the most significant local, national and international artistic directions of the last four decades.

The State Art Collection: Contemporary Conversations offers a slice of this rich lode. These 103 works selected from the larger collection are presented here in a two-part exhibition that is designed to suggest both the quality and diversity of the state's cultural heritage. Each section is designed to be complete in itself, and hence cuts across time, theme and medium. Hopefully this organizing principle will point to unexpected affinities between artists, while suggesting the multiple aspects of the work being done by contemporary South Carolina artists.



Jocelyn Chateauvert, *Eve, Clothes Optional*, 2006. Part I

voices and diverse concerns of South Carolina artists.

Thus, as its title suggests, this show can be seen as a series of conversations about the place of art in contemporary life. Works here address questions that

range from the importance of beauty and craftsmanship in art and the meanings of abstraction to the artist's responsibility toward the public, the efficacy of art as an agent of social change, and the role of place in an artist's imagination. The selection is meant to be somewhat rowdy and unruly, reflecting the variety of movements and debates that have roiled the art world over the last forty years.



Merton Simpson, *Confrontation #20*, 1968. Part II

For instance, works from the 1960s and 70s suggest the once pitched battle over the primacy of realism or abstraction that preoccupied artists and curators during that period. Other works reflect the emergence in the 1980s of the pluralist tendency known as postmodern as artists began to blur long established categories of medium, style and format. The pattern of collecting over time also reflects fundamental changes in the hierarchy and make-up of the art world, as movements like feminism, multiculturalism and globalism expanded narrow definitions of art that had often served to exclude women, artists of color and members of various ethnic minorities.

One of the older works in this show is Merton Simpson's *Confrontation #20* (1968), a muscular abstraction whose impassioned brushstrokes embody the turmoil of the Civil Rights era. Among the most recent is Jocelyn Chateauvert's intriguing *Eve, Clothes Optional* (2006), a leaf pendant of handmade paper and sterling silver. *Contemporary Conversations* contains a lead relief work by the world-renowned South Carolina native Jasper Johns, as well as paintings and sculptures by so called "outsider artists" such as Richard Burnside and Dan Robert Miller, whose works are completely outside the framework of the mainstream art world.

Also represented are artists like Gunars Strazdins, Bing Jian Zhang, and Philip Mullen, who look beyond the borders of the state to deal with general political, social and aesthetic issues. Other artists such as Linda

McCune and Leo Twiggs draw from personal, autobiographical sources. Modes of religious and spiritual belief have inspired works as diverse as Richard Burnside's *Crucifixion* (1991) Sigmund Abeles' *Annunciation with Shepherd* (1985) and Peter Lenzo's *Altar to Virgin and Child* (1992).

Contemporary Conversations also contains a good deal of work that bears the imprint of the landscape, social history, narrative conventions and craft traditions of the state and region. Such works present a unique opportunity to view the world through South Carolina eyes. For instance, the beauty and fragility of the Lowcountry is felt in Bruno Civitico's *Marsh Fire, Georgetown, SC* (1988), the drama of the state's woodlands in Sam Wang's *Suite of Ten Landscape Prints* (1984-85) and the special quality of beach life in Blue Sky's *Myrtle Beach* (1983). Distinctive regional architectural styles form the subject matter of works like Edward Rice's *Mausoleum* (1989) and James Edwards' *Neoclassical Modules* (1983).



Cecil Williams, *Untitled*, 1963. Part I

Other works take their cue from history. The struggle for civil rights is memorialized in works such as Jesse Guinyard's *White Flag/Refugee 2* (1986) Casimer Kowalski's *Solid South* (1983) and Cecil Williams' *Untitled*

photograph of civil rights demonstrators from 1963. The Southern storytelling tradition, often tinged with dreams, fantasy and outrageous humor, underlies works like Tarleton Blackwell's *Hog Series I* (1986), Elizabeth Whitfield-Cargile's *Scenes from My Puppet Master's Trunk* (1985) and Peter Riegler's *Still Crazy After*

All these Years (1978). Craft traditions past and present are also an important part of South Carolina's cultural heritage. They are represented here by works like Sara Ayers' *Jar with Heads* (1987) and Earl Robbins' *Snake Bowl* (1998), both inspired by the pottery of the indigenous Catawba Indians. Basketry traditions brought over from West Africa underlie Clay Burnette's *Pine Needle Basket* (1981) and Suzanne Abrams' *Movement Series, Convolution Basketry* (1983). Other artists, such as Larry Jordan and Jo Jeffers draw on the worldwide craft traditions of the Japanese or, like Steven Hewitt and Jean Clark, stir a strong dose of whimsy into their ceramic works. All these approaches are part of South Carolina's ongoing artistic conversation.

What, in the end, is the value of a state art collection? First and foremost, of course, it provides an historic record of art production in the state, offering an opportunity to celebrate the region's rich artistic tradition and the perceptiveness of the curators who have brought these works together. But it also provides an important social service. The South Carolina State Art Collection offers a reminder that art is a public resource to be shared by all. Gathered here, these works attest to the fact that a society that nurtures the arts is one that looks beyond the immediate necessities of life towards the larger values and meanings that make us human.

About the Curator

Eleanor Heartney is a contributing editor to *Art in America* and *Artpress* and has written extensively on contemporary art issues for other publications such as *Artnews*, *Art and Auction*, *The New Art Examiner*, the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

State Art Collection: *Contemporary Conversations* Part I ■ Oct. 1 - Nov. 1

State Art Collection: *Contemporary Conversations* Part II ■ Nov. 5 - Dec. 6

Educational Programs

- The Biennial Paradox – Eleanor Heartney
Friday, October 16 ■ 6 pm
- Art Today - Tales of Plastic Surgery, Genetically Altered Rabbits, and Other Acts of Art – Eleanor Heartney
Monday, October 19 ■ 6 pm
- Behind the Scenes: The Making of the State Art Collection Panel Discussion
Thursday, November 5 ■ 6 – 7:30 pm followed by the opening reception for Part II



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