

October Current Conversations: **Non-Conforming Art**

Open your mind to unexpected ways of interpreting works of art.

We bring ourselves to a work of art; our expectations are based on what we know from our experiences and what we perceive from past encounters with art and culture. The goal of this conversation is to look at works that don't conform to our personal or cultural expectations about art or may reveal unexpected interpretations upon closer examination and discussion. These interpretations can lead to greater awareness and deeper understanding as we navigate a changing world.

SECOND FLOOR: ASIA

Kondō Takahiro, *Reduction I*, 2013 (G200)

Porcelain with blue and green underglazes and "silver mist" overglaze 2014.64

We're in a gallery filled with Buddhist sculptures. Look at a Buddha (or bodhisattva). What do you feel based on what you see? Now look at *Reduction I* and share how you react to this sculpture of a Buddhist holy man seated in meditation. What does it mean to disrupt the "purpose" of a Buddhist image?

The overall mood of this gallery is meditative and calming. The Buddha taught that the suffering of this life could be overcome through a life of meditation along with right intentions, thought, and actions. Yet there is one work in the gallery that contrasts the peacefulness of Buddhist meditation with the pain of contemporary life. The artist brings us his unique perspective about a particular event that perhaps for him overshadows the Buddha's message about overcoming suffering.

LABEL: Kondō Takahiro was born into a family of traditional blue-and-white porcelain artists. Takahiro, however, has not been stymied by the weight of his family's past accomplishments. While still working with porcelain and cobalt, he has established his own reputation by creating works that he coats with a metallic amalgam of silver, gold, and platinum. In the final firing, this amalgam beads up on the surface, creating thousands of shiny droplets against the dark cobalt blue. In 2013, Kondō created a series of five porcelain sculptures based on casts of his own body. The project was in response to the tsunami and nuclear disaster at Fukushima in 2011. This figure, one of the five, is intended to represent the archetypal Japanese in the timeless guise of a Buddhist holy man, seated in the meditative posture. In this case, Kondō's beautiful "silver mist" glaze is intended to be a reference to the radioactivity that was released and that may well "drench" the people of Japan. Kondō's choice of title, *Reduction*, suggests the dire results of the disaster—the diminishment of an entire race.

TR: Kondo Takahiro was trained in the blue and white on porcelain tradition. Let's look at another contemporary artist who follows this tradition to create works "with a twist" to them.

[Before you reach the next stop, stop briefly at some blue and white Chinese porcelain along the way to discuss what you typically expect.]

Robin Best, *British East India Company-Trade & Colonise*, 2016 (G210)

Porcelain, pigments, silver 2017.40.1-5

Look closely at these exquisite vases to discover the unexpected in a gallery of Chinese porcelain. Australian artist Robin Best lives and works in China, using techniques originating there and emulated in Europe. The desire for blue and white porcelain in the West stimulated great economic, artistic, and cultural exchange for centuries. It gave rise to practices that resulted in both positive and negative consequences. Best's objects help tell the resulting story of trade and colonization.

See her website: <https://robinbestporcelain.com/2018/03/08/robin-best-porcelain/#more-33>

On the website, find the Mia objects with Best's explanation of the imagery on both sides. Invite viewers to look at the front and back of the vases and choose something they didn't expect on a "Chinese" vase. Use their responses to tell the story of trade and colonization. How has global trade changed in modern times? How has it remained the same?

LABEL: Since the early 2010s Australian artist Robin Best has made her home in Jingdezhen, China, the city at the center of the porcelain industry for more than 1,000 years. There she has perfected a style of painting in miniature on porcelain. Best draws her subjects from historical narratives and imagery concerned with global trade and cultural exchange among Europe, South and East Asia, and Australia from the 1600s through the 1800s. These five vases are intended to be seen together and read as a **story of British imperialism: they allude to the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the subsequent rise of British naval power; the founding of the East India Company in 1600, which advanced Britain's trade interests with India and China; and the exploration and colonization of Australia in the late 1700s and 1800s.**

TR: Some objects weren't intended to be seen as art but have nevertheless ended up in museums. Let's take a look at one now.

SECOND FLOOR: AFRICA

Sowah Kwei, *Fantasy Coffin*, 1993 (G250)

Wood, plaster, acrylic paint 2010.72

What is this large lobster doing in the African galleries? In talking about why these coffins are made, compare with other cultures' burial customs and practices. How similar? How different? (Don't assume all visitors are from Western cultures.) In the African gallery, contrast with Egyptian beliefs and practices (Mummy, False Door). Also note how objects in museums from many cultures came out of tombs as they were meant to be used and *enjoyed* in the afterlife.

<http://www.kanekwei.com/past-events>

LABEL: The imagination need not be limited by death: If you lived among the Ga people of Ghana, you could be buried in a giant cell-phone coffin, a cacao pod, or anything else related to your profession or social standing. This tradition was started in the 1950s by two artists trained in European carpentry. From the 1980s on, several workshops have produced coffins solely for the local and international art market, like this lobster coffin, pieced together from dozens of parts, covered with plaster, and sprayed with acrylic paint, a “fantasy coffin” never intended for burial. (This coffin was made to be put in a museum.)

TR: Artists often look at traditions that preceded them and think about new ways to use materials that may have been used for hundreds of years before them. In the Americas galleries tradition and innovation play an important role. [Use one of the following two works.]

SECOND FLOOR: AMERICAS

Many visitors may know about traditional, historic works by Native American artists. Our recent exhibition, *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, showed how work by Native artists is not static; it reflects contemporary life, can surprise and provoke us, and deals with timely and relevant issues.

What types of materials do we see in this gallery? We’ll look at artists who use materials and themes in non-conforming ways.

Jeffrey Gibson, *Nothing Is Eternal*, 2017 (G259)

Punching bag, acrylic felt, glass beads, metal jingles, artificial sinew, and nylon fringe
L2018.228.3 (promised gift)

Let’s examine the materials this artist has used. How are they “non-conforming” to more traditional uses of these materials? Point out Lakota dress in G261, which shows use of bells (for jingle sound), beads, and animal hide fringe.

Text on the bag:
Each Time You Love
Love as deeply as
If it were forever
Nothing is eternal

LABEL: The embellished punching bag could represent the body of a dancer. Artist Jeffrey Gibson, who is part Choctaw and part Cherokee, may have had this effect in mind when he clothed the bag in the beadwork, jingles, and nylon ribbons typical of powwow regalia. As a child, Gibson thought of powwows as conduits of tradition. Now, he sees them as a modern invention: “I define modernism as innovation or an invention responding to drastic changes in

circumstances and environment, and powwow is one of those things; it evolved as a way to bring people back together.”

Make a short stop at the Lakota dress for comparison on the way out of the gallery.

Alternate stop:

Kevin Pourier, *Mixed Blood Guy*, 2009 (G261)

Buffalo horn, colored minerals 2011.49

Oglala Lakota artist Kevin Pourier challenges perceptions of American Indian art. He uses materials with historical connections to comment on contemporary life. Pourier is one of the only artists in the country working in the medium of incised buffalo horn. What do you think is the significance of using this material?

What does the title of this work tell us? Now look at the messages he has carved into the buffalo horn. What are these messages telling us? Pourier looks for ways to explore identity and political issues; he uses art as a vehicle to express the nature of being part of Native and non-Native worlds (French and Lakota heritage).

He talks about his work in this video interview:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpoiVn3CTik>

Pourier has been carving buffalo horn for about 20 years. His home and studio are on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, on the beautiful northern edge of the Badlands. He uses material related to the Lakota, first called *Pte Oyate kin*, the Buffalo People. The work carries forward traditional Lakota artistic practices of creating spoons and vessels from the horns of the revered animal. He sees his work as coming out of the lifeways of the people and also creating a new cultural art form as a way to understand and broaden what Lakota art was, is, and could be.

Sources: <https://www.nativeartsandcultures.org/kevin-pourier> and

<https://kinggalleries.com/brand/pourier-kevin/>

LABEL: “I created “Mixed Blood Guy” to reveal my complex feelings of identity, belonging, and disconnection—feelings many people experience today. Wearing my signature hat and sunglasses, I am literally stuck in the middle of two worlds. On either side, wagging fingers criticize me for being too Native American or not Native American enough. I carved my self-portrait into a black buffalo horn and used natural minerals mixed with resin to color the surface. The monarch butterfly above my head appears in many of my artworks and came to me during a Lakota ceremony. I see butterflies as an important connection to my Lakota identity.” —Kevin Pourier

[Next go to one of the following two works.]

TR: What do you expect from a work of art? Some artists mean to provoke and unsettle us as they explore current controversial issues that make for difficult conversations.

SECOND FLOOR: TARGET ATRIUM

Jim Denomie, *Vatican Café*, 2014 (G280)

Oil on canvas

How do you facilitate an open conversation about works of art that bring up current controversial issues? What do you think viewers might find offensive about this work? (What kinds of artworks do you find yourself avoiding using on tours?)

The topic and format invite us to dialogue about the characters in the painting and the reference to Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Who are the characters present at the Vatican Café? Denomie does not shy away from difficult issues; he uses acerbic humor to comment on historic and present events and their impact on Native American lives:

<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2014/11/17/denomie-dialogues-exhibit>

Alternate stop:

TR: At our next work, several artists were involved, and they didn't know what they were creating. The artist who conceptualized the work also chose an unexpected subject.

Tim Lowly, *At 25 (recto and verso)*, 2010 (G280)

Acrylic, gold leaf, foil, gold pigment and glitter on wood 2016.95

How was this work of art constructed? What is unexpected about the process used? What happens when several artists contribute to a project without really knowing the result or intent?

Thirty artists participated in the production of this work of art. Each received a section of a photograph to reproduce as stylistically neutrally as possible in black and white acrylic paint. For the back of their portion, they were simply told, "Make it gold," resulting in a very eclectic result. (This work celebrates Temma's "golden" birthday.)

LABEL: *At 25* was a collaborative work commemorating Lowly's daughter Temma's 25th birthday. She has been the subject of his work since birth and he has explored his relationship to her as caregiver and father. Temma was born with severe physical disabilities and the experience has been challenging and powerful for Lowly and his wife. He considers Temma a creative collaborator in his work and invited friends to contribute to this icon to her life.

Temma is frequently the subject of Mr. Lowly's paintings. Lowly says, "Part of my fairly political agenda is to say that disabled children are a part of life. These are not freaks. What I'm saying is that we should advocate for eyes of compassion that see human beings as human beings, rather than separating them into the beautiful, the ugly, the normal, the freak."

TR: Mia has several well-known period rooms. They were mostly taken from historic buildings and recreated in the museum. But what about a room that was "found" at Mia? What might we expect – or not expect?

THIRD FLOOR off Target Atrium

Mark Dion, *Curator's Office*, 2012-13 (G378)

Mixed media installation 2013.17

How did Mia find this room? Are people "taken in" by it? Before you tell them the "truth," I recommend you read a few excerpts of the story from "Art Inspires: Novelist Norah Labiner on the mystery of the vanishing curator" (from Mia's website and given below):

<https://new.artsmia.org/stories/art-inspires-novelist-norah-labiner-on-the-mystery-of-the-vanishing-curator/>

I never knew my great uncle Barton Kestle. He disappeared before I was born. He belongs, too, to a disappeared world of typewriters and teacups. In old family photographs he is captured in profile, always off to the side, distant, blurred, as though trying to escape the camera.

On a Saturday night in March 1954, he boarded a train and was never seen again. I suppose that he dreamed of escape; who doesn't? Who didn't? Who hasn't? I myself once vanished in the woods for three days, and when I came back to the world, I had no memory, but was carrying a broken music box. Barton Kestle was the ghost of my childhood. I found him everywhere and nowhere at once. He was no longer the quiet museum curator trapped in black-and-white pictures. He was the one who grabbed Eichmann on Garibaldi Street. He broke up Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. He was a spy. He went to Hollywood. He was writing mystery novels in Paris. He invented invisible ink. I was certain so many times that I saw his face—on the street, on television, in a crowd. And then he was gone.

When the Curator's Office was discovered in a renovation of the museum in 2011—uncovered, really, as a walled-up city at an archeological dig—the artifacts of his life were found preserved: an umbrella, a magnifying glass, a stopped clock. I confess: I wanted to find a clue to his disappearance. I found instead a pair of galoshes, a novel by Henry James, a black telephone, a ball of twine, and a box of chocolate creams. I found the chalk outline around a missing person.

The curator's room is a box that does not open or close. It proves that a life can be measured out in a coffee spoon or misplaced like a train ticket. The clock in the curator's office is still right

twice a day. There is a secret that even time will not tell. There is an art to absence. And you can walk through any doorway into a story. Here then is the absence of Barton Kestle.

More information is also available at: <https://artstories.artsmia.org/#/o/116294>

The Curator's Office plays with our notions of fact and fiction. The artist wanted the viewer to question the significance of objects in a cultural, historic, and environmental perspective. Some things are not as they appear. Look closer. How does the creation of this space relate to other period rooms at Mia? Can a period room truly represent and "interpret" another place and time? (Mia's "Living Rooms" project invites us to re-think our Charleston Rooms, McFarland Room, Providence Room, Tudor Room, etc.)

LABEL: Constructing a fictional account of a Mia curator who mysteriously disappeared in 1954, artist Mark Dion created this period room as if the curator's office had been sealed up and, over time, forgotten. The vintage habitat provides a fascinating snapshot of a typical working environment from the 1950s and compelling context for the range of important examples of period industrial design. A virtual time capsule, the room is filled with objects that will be nostalgic for some but which many others will find unfamiliar and even exotic, including the Underwood typewriter, a Polaroid Land Camera, an adding machine, clock radio, and other streamlined, mass-produced objects from the midcentury. It also houses Cubist-inspired paintings, an elegant Art Deco bar caddy, and an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts. Working within the language of museological and scientific display, Dion calls into question the acts of collecting and exhibiting, thereby interrogating their significance to culture, history, and our environment. In this way, Curator's Office illustrates a "period room" by highlighting the re-creation of a historical moment through the curation and display of objects within an interior space.

TR: The room we just looked at was not what it seemed, and it was the office of a fictional person. Next we'll look at a painting of a real person who was not always who he presented himself to be.

Egon Schiele, *Portrait of Paris von Gütersloh*, 1918 (G377)

Oil on canvas 54.30

What do you read in the sitter's expression?

What do you think of Schiele's choice of colors? How do they affect this work?

What do you expect from a portrait? Would you like Schiele to paint your portrait?

Discuss what Schiele was aiming for:

--figural distortion

--exploration of the sitter's psyche and sexuality

--draftsmanship: emphasis on contour, graphic marks, linearity (he admired Manet, Degas)

--investigation of sitter's inner life and emotional state

What was the definition of a “masterpiece” during the nineteenth century? With the turn of the century, how did art and artistic practice change/“non-conform” to age-old practices and beliefs?

What does it mean to be part of an art “secession”?

The formation of the **Vienna Secession in 1897** marked the beginning of modern art in Austria, a nation at the time noted for its attachment to a highly conservative tradition. It was the coalescence of the first movement of artists and designers who were committed to a forward-thinking, internationalist view of the art world, all-encompassing in its embrace and integration of genres and fields, and—highly idealistically—freed from the dictates of entrenched values or prevailing commercial tastes. Led at the beginning by **Gustav Klimt** (reference his well-known painting, *Woman in Gold, Adele Bloch-Bauer*), the Secessionists gave contemporary art its first dedicated venue in the city. Klimt used these lines of poetry in his work from Friedrich Schiller's poem: **"If you cannot please everyone with your actions and your art, you should satisfy a few. To please many is dangerous."**

<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/vienna-secession/>

Paris von Gütersloh, by the way, was a multi-talented bohemian artist—and a façade. His real name was **Albert Conrad Kiehlreiber**. He adopted a pseudonym for his writing and took Gütersloh as his official name in 1921. He also had another name, Albert Matthäus, which he used earlier as an actor and stage designer.

LABEL: Schiele's death during the 1918 influenza pandemic, at the age of only twenty-eight, left this portrait of his friend Paris von Gütersloh (1887–1973) unfinished. Nonetheless, the work is a masterpiece of Austrian Expressionist portraiture. Gütersloh was a painter, writer, actor, producer, and stage designer, who wrote the first study of Schiele's art in 1911. Schiele admired his friend's extraordinary intellectual and artistic talents and sought to portray him as a creative genius. With hands raised in a gesture of both attraction and repulsion, eyes transfixed and body tense, Gütersloh is shown at the moment of artistic inspiration.

TR: Artists are always looking at what has come before them and what is going on around them. The next artist decided to use a particular style to produce unexpected results.

[Stop briefly in the rotunda to discuss a few aspects of Baroque art.]

Kehinde Wiley, *Santos Dumont - The Father of Aviation II*, 2009 (G310)

Oil on canvas 2010.99

After discussing some characteristics of Baroque art (17thc. European), talk about reasons for putting this painting in this gallery.

How is Wiley “non-conforming” to art history? What happens when the artist lets the sitter choose an out-of-context setting?

LABEL: Kehinde Wiley is best known for his large-scale portraits of black men depicted in poses that cast them as kings, prophets, and saints in the tradition of "old master" canvases, reminiscent especially of Renaissance and Baroque painting. Wiley's paintings transpose black bodies into the context of traditional European portraiture, challenging the racial marginalization of art history and questioning issues related to identity and self on a global scale. Santos-Dumont is part of a larger body of work by Wiley called "The World Stage." For this series, the artist traveled to diverse locations around the globe, including Africa, China, India, and Brazil, where he created portraits that explore the international phenomenon of urban youth culture. Wiley met the two young men featured in this painting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The subjects chose to position themselves as the two "fallen heroes" in a well-known public monument dedicated to one of Brazil's pioneer aviators, Alberto Santos-Dumont. By depicting these black men as the pioneers of Brazilian aviation, Wiley instills his anonymous subjects with a powerful and heroic identity, essentially immortalizing them in oil paint.

[Show photo prop of the original sculpture. These props are in the file cabinet in the tour office, lower drawer, under "W."]

Conclusion:

We've looked at many ways that artists create works that don't always conform to our personal or cultural expectations and that may reveal unexpected discoveries upon closer examination and discussion. As you wander the galleries, I encourage you to continue to look for the unexpected as a way to achieve greater awareness and deeper understanding of our constantly changing world.

Other possible alternate third floor objects:

Roy DeForest, *Camp Monet*

Surrealism gallery

Beauford Delaney, *Untitled*, oil on raincoat fragment 2003.106 (currently not on view)

Contemporary Art galleries: *Mapping Black Identities*

[The following work of interest is not presently on view.]

SECOND FLOOR: ASIA

Okuhara Seiko, *Orchids*, 1870 (G223)

Ink on mica paper 2013.29.349

Along with non-conforming art, there are also non-conforming artists. By comparing the “old label” and “new label”, talk about the museum’s revision of the text to recognize use of non-gender pronouns and non-conforming gender expression:

OLD LABEL: Treasured since ancient times by Chinese and Japanese literati and a popular subject among scholar-painters, orchids of the genus *Cymbidium* are known for their highly fragrant boat-shaped flowers that rise on stems from clumps of elongated leaves and for their ability to grow almost anywhere, even in poor soil; they have thus long served as symbols of fortitude. This ink painting of fragrant cymbidiums clinging to an overhanging rock is an early work by Okuhara Seiko, who made her debut in artistic and literary circles of Tokyo only five years earlier. By her mid-thirties she had become one of the most successful artists in the city in a field dominated by men, with at one time as many as 300 students working beneath her. Nearly all her paintings are accompanied by self-composed Chinese-style verse: Amid the mountains, orchids aspire to grow as freely as weeds; leaves warm themselves and flowers flutter, saturated with the spirit of the season. The orchid sends forth its fragrance; never extending too far, it wafts past the dirt and dust of the everyday world.

NEW LABEL: Although women were celebrated as authors and poets, paintings by female artists have been characterized by Japanese historians as “effeminate.” In a field dominated by men and given that women were not permitted to enter an apprenticeship in a traditional workshop, Seiko underwent a name change so they might be allowed to study painting. Seiko, meaning “clear lake,” is a gender-neutral name giving no direct indication of an individual's gender identity. Throughout their life, Seiko’s gender expression has been characterized as presenting oneself in a “masculine” appearance typically wearing male garments and a shorter hairstyle. By concealing their “feminine” traits, Seiko was able to climb the social ladder and become a renowned figure within the literati community. By their mid-thirties they were recognized as one of the most successful artists in the region of Edo, Tokyo. In an effort to provide an opportunity for young women to pursue a serious education outside of the home, Seiko opened a co-ed school in the early 1870s with as many as 300 students working beneath them. Seiko retained a liberal lifestyle while in Edo eventually entering a forty-year-long relationship with their partner and former student, Watanabe Seiran (1855-1918).

Photo from:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Okuhara_Seiko

