

Housatonic Museum of Art Exhibits 'Eye on the Storm'

"The barrage of endless data from the most intense hard news to the silliest of social media is something we all must muddle through on some level each day. Depending on one's needs or interests only a small percentage of said information is of any use, and an even smaller amount actually leaves us with palpable, lasting effects. What is most amazing is that somehow, every bit of the images and information has some potential use to someone out there, and it's up to the individual to pick and choose what benefits, bothers or beguiles them..."

D. Dominick Lombardi, Curator of *Eye on the Storm*

Ironically offering a perspective on calm, *Eye on the Storm* opens fittingly on a night destined for a summer downpour, lightning, thunder, winds, and the warning of a possible tornado. I decide to not risk life and limb on I-95 and postpone my visit. The next day, sunny skies urge me to go. I enter the gallery alone. artes fine arts magazine

Om. Om. Ommmm. The sound of this mystical chant plays in the background, eerily encouraging visitors to let go of their ego and find their center, their truth, their third eye. The mantra comes from video artist, Richard Hoglund's *Drag Yourself Along the Road / Shave Your Head / Burn Your Clothes / Bathe in the Sea*. I am pulled in various directions, distracted by artwork which makes me wonder if this is *Eye on The Storm*. I know it is, but at first glance, I don't understand why some of these artworks are on display.

This was my initial reaction as I spotted three sports jerseys ahead of me. An orange NBA shirt strung over a basketball hoop and two others displayed on mannequin busts are progressively unthreaded, leaving a portion of the garment intact, and then creating a spider web-like gown so that each and every fiber becomes visible. There is a ghostlike quality to the sculptures, an emptiness in the center where the body would fill these shirts seems irrelevant now. Selecting specific individual sports stars, artist, Karen Shaw, raises the symbolic nature of the jersey to a more spiritual level by asking 'aren't we all cut of the same cloth?' There are so many measurable 'moments' in sports history that all these significant names, numbers, facts, figures, and stats can soon become extraneous and forgotten as new records are broken and new stars emerge. And just like celestial stars, we return back to that from which we are made, dust.



Shawn Huckins, *Mrs. Alexander Cumming: Don't Go There, Girlfriend* (2012), acrylic on canvas.

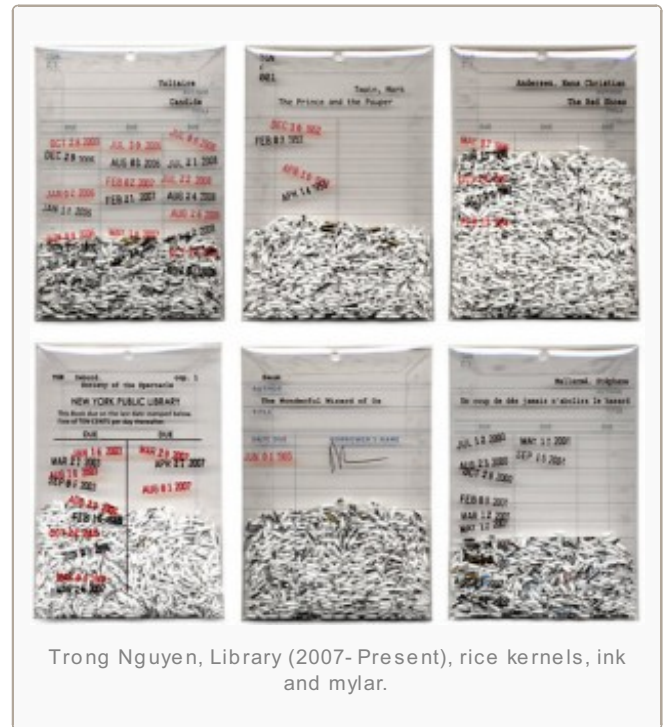


Marci MacGuffie, *Decoy* (2010), ink, watercolor, pencil on paper.

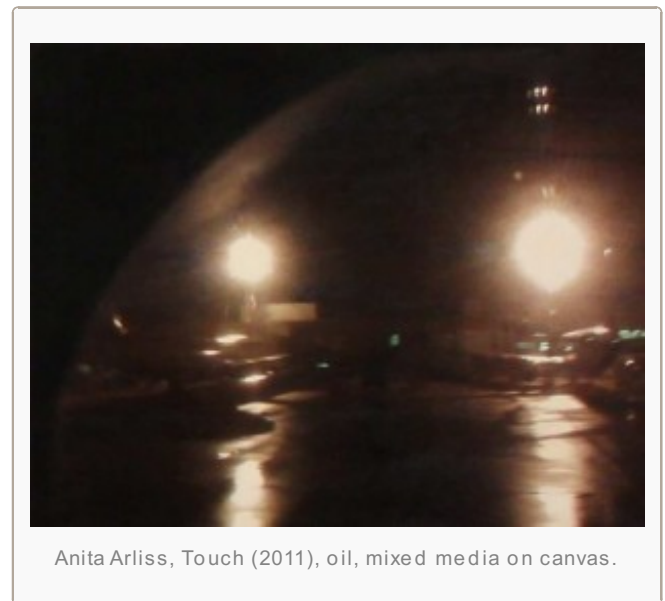
A bit jolted, I step away from the center and walk the gallery's sides where I fall in love with Trong Nguyen's *Library*. Three clear plastic envelopes mimic the old fashioned check-out cards that were once so neatly snug into a book's interior that existed before self-check-out machines printed a receipt. The title and author's name appear on top and a list of due dates in black and red ink stamped on the lines show the book's borrowing history. These tiny envelopes are so nostalgic bringing back a rush of memories of taking out books as a child. I always found it fascinating to see when a book had been read prior to taking it off the shelf, and to know that other people, even though anonymous, had held this book in their hands before me.

In some instances, years had passed and opening it again felt like letting a genie out of a lamp. *Library* is a study on how we consume culture and the staying power of words. Inside Nyguyen's mylar envelopes are grains of white rice on which the artist has painstakingly written each and every word of selected literary classic chapters. I try to compose a sentence with some of the words that are visible on the rice. From Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, Chapter 1, I create: 'Our luck, see, avoid lagoons.' I find it difficult to stop finding words and reading becomes play. From, Jane Austen's last chapter of *Pesuasion*, I find: 'Man, marriage, both suffering and gratification.'

Content, I move on to Nguyen's second piece in the show, *Portable Confessional*. Two brown paper bags with cut out rounded crosses are positioned so that they protrude from the wall and form a comfortable (or not so comfy) space. A thin screen separates the listener and the speaker of some of the most intimate words anyone would ever reveal to another human being in a confessional. The purpose of reconciliation is to clean the conscience by speaking out sins to a priest and seeking forgiveness from God. Catholic believers trust that these words that they release will never again be repeated by a living soul. The confession acts as a spiritual vehicle of absolution and Nguyen's piece raises many questions and perhaps, most importantly, where is God? The simplicity and portability of material and form answers this question, everywhere.



Trong Nguyen, *Library* (2007- Present), rice kernels, ink and mylar.



Anita Arliss, *Touch* (2011), oil, mixed media on canvas.

Yet, in today's media storm, there is no separation of sacred and profane. We are 'privileged' to see politicians, actors, musicians, athletes, priests, and even ordinary people who attain star status from reality TV shows fall from grace. Their private lives become public fodder and we are on the receiving end of blow by blow details on stories of deception. Many people thrive on consuming the latest entertainment news because it makes them feel better that their own life circumstances aren't that bad. Or maybe it's because they think that it is important news and that there is a life lesson to be learned. Others choose to block the superfluous noise, to concentrate on themselves, and focus on what is 'truly' important. Often in the end, there seems to be a communal understanding that these stars are just human after all and that perhaps there is room for forgiveness.



Isak Applin, *The Letter* (2011), oil on panel.

Lombardi subtly brings back these concepts, again and again, as each piece in *Eye on The Storm* builds upon each other, like Ernest Concepcion's *OMG Christ*. An iconic image of God's love for humanity, the Sacred Heart of Jesus is distorted to show a screaming Christ with OMG across his mouth. One of the most socially syndicated acronyms of all time, OMG has no meaning anymore. Rather than a prayer, it has evolved into an exclamation of banal frustration.

And then there is Mia Brownwell's *Still Life with First Fruit*, a double helix strand of DNA composed of juicy red apples and slender strands of white snakes twisting and turning through sprocket gears. Her painting brings into question the conflict of good and evil and whether we are born with both traits and what influences our inner workings to bring out either a sacred heart emitting light or a shadowy heart of darkness.

In addition to curating the show, Lombardi contributes to the conversation by including a selection of his *Urchin* sculptures. Reminiscent of baby dolls, the sculpted sand, childlike bodies are composed of found objects from the seashore that make up parts of these creatures' bodies and personalities.



Ernest Concepcion, *OMG Christ II* (2011) acrylic on paper.

Urchin #36 is perched atop a paddock fence enjoying an imagined bucolic view. The urchin's eye is a kaleidoscope lens and the head contains more mechanical, gadgety pieces. According to Lombardi, "The Urchin series depicts people and animals marginalized socially, economically, psychologically, and emotionally by the current downtrends in our global economy." Lombardi brings into play the duality of nature and nurture and how our environment affects both our inner and outer vision.

Leaving the gallery, I almost miss Arcady Kotler's *Drop*, a creamy white orb formed of thick rope positioned to the angle of the Earth's axis. It rests gently on a perfectly flat circular puddle of white rope, as if reflecting its own center. The orb seems so delicate and fragile amidst the other impassioned works, that with any waft of wind, it might be knocked off its center.

Right: Arcady Kotler, *Drop* (2012), rope.

Eye on the Storm is about picking up on language, objects, images, sounds, and feelings that we experience every day and deciphering them so that this knowledge becomes our own universal truth. So, how can we distinguish truth from fallacy? Only by looking at the world straight in the eye.

By: Michelina Docimo, Contributing Writer

Eye on the Storm

At the Housatonic Museum of Art

Through July 26, 2013

900 Lafayette Blvd.

Bridgeport, CT 06604

<http://www.hcc.commnet.edu/artmuseum>

The exhibition includes work from, Anita Arliss, Leah Oats, Holly Sears, Isak Applin, Arcady Kotler, Chambliss Giobbi, Arnold Mesches, Marcus Jansen, Marci MacGuffie, Rebecca Reeves, D. Dominick Lombardi, Ernest Concepcion, Shawn huckins, Rashaad Newsome, Richard Hogle, Mia Brownell, D. Jack Solomon, Jonathan Beer, Susan Breen, Patricia Smith, Trong Nguyen, Melanie Vote, Paul Gagner, Tim Merry, and Karen Shaw.

Michelina Docimo's writing focuses on sustainability and the representation of nature in art. Her writings have appeared in ARTESMagazine.com, Culture Catch, CT Green Scene, D'Art International, and other industry publications.

Her first book is Echoes: Listening to the Voices in Spirited Trees.

<http://www.michelinadocimo.com/spirited-trees/>



D. Dominick Lombardi, *Urchin #36* (2009), sand, acrylic medium, found objects.

