

## "Split/Doubles" at Wooten Gallery

### Selena Kimball's hybrid portraits are narratives of lost and found history

By Jessica Bryce Young 

I predict a pile-up at this opening at Valencia College's Anita S. Wooten Gallery Friday night. That's not a jab at the parking situation out there, which probably eases by evening – it's just that, in order to apprehend Selena Kimball's mysterious hybrid portraits, one must back away from them or even bend at the waist to attempt to see them "upside down" – inverted yoga poses would be an ideal viewing position for these images, but there's not much room for that at a crowded opening.

The small gallery is hung with very large pencil drawings, some 4 feet by 5 feet, of fractured faces that morph between male and female, youth and age, up and down. It's a play on the Victorian-era optical illusions popular on illustrated matchbooks, in children's books and in comic strips (see Gustave Verbeek's astounding "The Upside Downs of Little Lady Lovekins and Old Man Muffaroo," collected and published in 2009 by Sunday Press). That same sense of whimsy is present in Kimball's deconstructions/reconstructions, in which a curl of hair becomes a nose; a sleeve becomes an ear; a flowing bird becomes an exuberant hat when viewed at a different angle. But these drawings are suffused with a deeper emotion.

Part of that is down to the source material. Kimball's people are culled from a book found and purchased at the Strand Bookstore in New York City, a photo album documenting several generations of "a prominent East Coast American family whose name you would recognize," says Kimball in our email conversation about the show. The sense of a family resemblance haunts these half-faces, somewhat teasingly. Part of it is Kimball's choice of visual hinges, the particular details of each drawing that serve a dual purpose (nostril/eye, pipe/feather). These hinges emphasize certain details by repurposing them, rendering them mysteriously significant.

Valencia's Wooten Gallery features emerging young artists from all over, fulfilling the inspiration component of its mission for Valencia's art students. Curator and professor Jackie Otto-Miller was introduced to Kimball's work through a mutual acquaintance, the artist Courtney Puckett, and admires the looseness and fluidity of Kimball's line. "It's very inventive, what she's done," says Otto-Miller.

Kimball's work – not just *Split/Doubles*, but several series of collaged vintage photographs and illustrations, as well as a fascinating project called "Watching the Audience" in which she sets a camera in front of the screen and leaves the aperture open for a film's duration, thus recording a "long-term reaction shot" – is about not merely seeing, but "the subjective process of looking itself," she says. *Split/Doubles* and *A History of Things I Remember but Will Never See* (a group of six oils hanging in the atrium outside the gallery) are just a handful of pleasant, technically accomplished drawings and paintings, if all you do is cast your eye over them unthinkingly. The viewer must engage with the work in order to tease out the playful details – much as Kimball did with the source material.

"Working with documents [and] documentary evidence is very important for my own process," Kimball says. The tangible work that ends up in the gallery "is as much a result of the process of my looking closely at the material ... as it is about the subject, the particular history." In other words, there is no "right" way of looking – and no right side up.

### **"A History of Things I Remember but Will Never See"**

These six paintings are puzzling at first, though beautiful: a group of ghostly-dark faces, just barely shimmering into view out of blue-black backgrounds. Kimball says they, too, fit in with her theory that her work is as much about her looking as it is about what she's seeing. She writes that the series consists of "portraits of spectators of major events in U.S. history culled from the margins of journalists' photographs. The spectators weren't the subject of the documentary photograph – the event itself was the subject – but in my series I switched the focus to be the act of looking at history itself."

### **SPLIT/DOUBLES**

Through March 8; opening and artist's talk 6:30 p.m. Friday, Jan. 18 | Anita S. Wooten Gallery,  
Valencia College, 701 N. Econlockhatchee Trail; 407-582-2298  
**[events.valenciacollege.edu/eastcampusgallery](https://events.valenciacollege.edu/eastcampusgallery)**  
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