

Cremated remains, handmade paper, archival prints and vintage postcards shape bold new exhibits at the Danforth

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Among three new exhibits at the Danforth that employ unconventional materials, Catherine Smith's "Dread Running" takes the visionary cake by sculpting the cremated ashes and bones of abandoned shelter animals into 48 reliefs of a running dog to make a stop-action film of a dog running. Director Jessica Roscio has brought to Danforth Art Museum at Framingham State University Smith, Rebecca Hutchinson and Katherine Gulla, three artists who shape very different materials into original works that explore human connections with nature and how works of art grow into our memories and identities.

FRAMINGHAM - Rather than just display painted canvases, Director Jessica Roscio has brought to Danforth Art Museum at Framingham State University three artists who shape very different materials into original works that explore human connections with nature and how works of art grow into our memories and identities.

Arriving at a time visitors are hungry for sensation, the trio of just-opened shows should provide surpassing visual, tactile and cerebral pleasures.

Though planned before the pandemic that temporarily closed the museum, these exhibits for the Danforth's fall season take unconventional approaches to raise intriguing questions that will engage visitors' imaginations long after they leave the shows.

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Each of the three Bay State artists engage visitors at multiple levels to provoke visceral responses to their works' construction and visions.

They ask: How can we find solace in the natural world amid an environmental crisis? How can art help us appreciate nature? How does the art we collect influence the ways we remember and memorialize others?

Rebecca Hutchinson has sculpted a garden of night-blooming flowers from handmade paper, ceramics and recycled materials in her striking installation, "Midnight Blooms."

For "Passage," Katherine Gulla photographs funerary statuary, leaves and puddles with the revelatory impact of a Zen riddle to encourage viewers to meditate on their own journeys through the natural world.

Now serving as the Danforth's director and curator, Roscio has organized the three exhibits into gallery and floor spaces that suit the breadth of the presentations and aesthetic visions.

Catherine Smith's ambitious "A Cabinet of Curiosities" comprises a multilevel exploration of works of art that "evoke both history and remembrance."

Occupying parts of two galleries and a hall, it features three disparate components, thematically related but distinct in composition: "The Whale Project," "Women in Pants" and "Dread Running."

Displaying in adjoining galleries, Hutchinson and Gulla have created miniature environments through which visitors can pass in different ways to intuit their intentions.

At first glance, Hutchinson's nine towering "blooms" appear remarkably real though one could not find them in any botanical digest.

The flowers Hutchinson crafted from porcelain paper clay for “Midnight Blooms” might be blossoming in moonbeams slanting through a faraway ocean, a wizard’s garden or your backyard. Perhaps, they will take root in visitors’ imaginations.

A professor of art and design at the College of Visual and Performing Arts at UMass Dartmouth, Hutchinson has created a gallery-sized ecosystem that reflects her passion for works that reveal “the human condition in sculptural form.”

Rising from the gallery floor like organic stalks, they resemble stalagmites of coral or kelp that blossomed in a fairy tale or their maker’s studio.

Hutchinson has also included several other cunningly constructed pieces titled “Needles Tumble Stack,” made from paper clay and glaze that resemble a platter of pretzels and a lobster trap partially filled with sea anemones.

Like a whispered prayer, Katherine Gulla’s “Passage” invites visitors into a meditative space where her images of windblown leaves, puddles of water and shadows drifting across funerary statues remind us that life is as ephemeral as a summer breeze or an ice storm.

The Boston-based photographer, painter and mixed-media artist is showing work from three series titled “Path,” “Falling” and “Fossil,” presenting subtle and enigmatic images of often-overlooked things we encounter as we pass through the natural world.

While Hutchinson’s ceramic blooms occupy the gallery’s center, Gulla displays her images on all four gallery walls as if to encourage visitors to follow her on walks through the Arnold Arboretum into a quiet contemplation of nature’s everyday wonders.

Describing her art, Gulla wrote, “I lift fleeting images off surfaces and make them into objects.”

For “Path,” she has transposed images of puddles onto acrylic and canvas panels set along the floor and hanging on the walls.

She has created for “Fallen” eight tableaux of swirling leaves on powder-coated aluminum, discovering abstract patterns in their motion.

Viewers may wonder if there is a specific meaning to be discerned or an aesthetic vision to be glimpsed in these minimalist images. Or, does the artist intend them as Rorschach inkblot tests for viewers to discover their own meanings.

Wall text in the show states: “Gulla’s works offer a contemplative look at the way we interact with the natural world and how we use space to shape our own journeys.”

For “Fossil,” the largest and, perhaps, most accessible series, she photographs shadows of leaves and branches spreading across the faces of funerary monuments, creating an elegaic sense of human memory and nature mingling in haunting, mournful images.

Writing on her website, Gulla compares the fleeting shadows to “impressions of ancient plants left on fossils,” a somber observation on human mortality considered against the passage of time..

Rather than providing easy answers, Gulla respects her viewers by inviting their responses to images that are – in equal parts – lovely, challenging and profound.

Catherine Smith’s expansive “A Cabinet of Curiosities” provides ambitious, original and sometimes revelatory art.

In breadth and presentation, “A Cabinet...” offers a wide range of objects by other artists to explore her essential premise of connections between making and collecting art.

Like Hutchinson and Gulla, Smith has forged an exhibit that uses art to prompt viewers to seek their own responses to complex questions. Smith’s “A Cabinet...” comprises three sections,

“Women in Pants” offers about 20 vintage photos of late 19th and early 20th century women rejecting traditional gender roles paired with works from the Danforth’s permanent collection that address similar contemporary issues.

Borrowed from Smith’s collection, these daguerreotypes, albumen prints and other forms of early photography fuse historic images of women, such as entertainer and activist Josephine Baker, asserting their personal freedom by adopting “male attire” in ways that presaged contemporary attitudes.

“The Whale Project” presents a multitiered intertwining of ideas about the environment, folk art and popular iconography.

Using plastic that she has chosen to eliminate from her life, Smith crafted several engaging images of whales that refer obliquely to Americans’ continuing use of ecologically-damaging waste materials.

The third, “Dread Running: A Memorial to Lost Dogs,” is simply the most strikingly original work displayed in the three fall season exhibits.

Inspired by English photographer Eadweard Muybridge’s pioneering images of running racehorses and his less-known images of an English mastiff named “Dread” trotting along, Smith created her own movie that is original and visually arresting.

Smith presents so much to look at, visitors might initially think they are grasping her intentions. Her vision is more complex than meets the idea.

Visitors should consider viewing Hutchinson's and Gulla's exhibits first to experience them within the single galleries they fill before venturing into Smith's sprawling three-ring artistic circus.

Among three exhibits that employ unconventional materials, Smith's "Dread Running" takes the visionary cake by sculpting the cremated ashes and bones of abandoned shelter animals into 48 reliefs of a running dog to make a stop-action film of a dog running.

Don't come to this show looking for Rin Tin Tin. Instead, visitors will see something entirely original. And jolting.

Smith has made an epiphanic home movie about mortality, inspiration, creative boldness and the possibilities of art that is at once headshaking and wondrous.



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