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MUSEUMS

## Mapping a Museum's Collection with Memory

by Ben Valentine on May 27, 2014

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Hughen/Starkweather, "Re:depiction" at the Asian Art Museum (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

SAN FRANCISCO — "The rhino looks like it has a terrible skin disease," said Jay Xu, director of the Asian Art Museum (AAM), discussing a rhino vessel in the museum's collection as part of a project by artist duo Hughen/Starkweather (Amanda Hughen and Jennifer Starkweather). "It is a little bit of an acquired taste. It looks like a rhino in the jungle wearing camouflage." Xu clearly has a deep understanding of the vessel's cultural and religious significance, but the interview was refreshingly casual. How often do we get to hear a museum director speak this way about a work displayed in his museum? Too rarely.



Rhino ritual object from the Shang dynasty (1600–1050 BCE) (click to enlarge)

Hughen/Starkweather's project, "Re:depiction," was the latest in a public programming series at the AAM called the Artists Drawing Club. Organized by Marc Mayer, the institution's educator for public programs, the series commissions Bay Area artists to create a new project in response to the AAM's collection, exhibitions, location, and/or architecture. "Re:depiction" was an audio and visual intervention in the collection, for which

Hughen and Starkweather asked staff to recall from memory works on display that they felt particularly connected to. Using those memories as inspiration, the duo created large, semiabstract works on paper, which were hung like scrolls in the museum's main staircase for one night only (May 22). Along the handrails small audio players and headphones were set up that allowed visitors to listen to the original interviews while admiring the work — hence the opportunity to hear the director speak so frankly about a camo-wearing rhino.



Hughen/Starkweather, "Jay Xu, Ritual Vessel" (2014)

Upon arriving at the museum on May 22, guests received a map connecting the contemporary drawings and interviews with their corresponding works on display in the permanent collection. Walking through the museum with these multiple layers of meaning and interpretation at hand — the original object, a staff memory, and the subsequent painting — showcased the fresh manner of looking that the Artists Drawing Club is aiming for.

Too often, museums offer only precise and manicured wall text to guide the audience. Maybe that's okay, but there are so many ways of experiencing and engaging with artwork; featuring only one, as museums tend to do, misses something fundamental about how humans really engage with art. The Artists Drawing Club — somewhat like other intervention series at institutions around the country, such as the Museum of Modern Art's Artist's Choice series and the Jewish Museum's recent Barbara Bloom show — asks how artists can provide us with new means of experiencing work. This may mean approaches that a museum hasn't considered or provided before, including sight, smell, audio, movement, and more. One of the benefits of contemporary art is that it offers a space in which alternative, creative, and maybe even absurd perspectives are taken seriously; in this way "Re:depiction" became as much a reimagining of the AAM's collection as it was a showcase of Hughen/Starkweather's work.



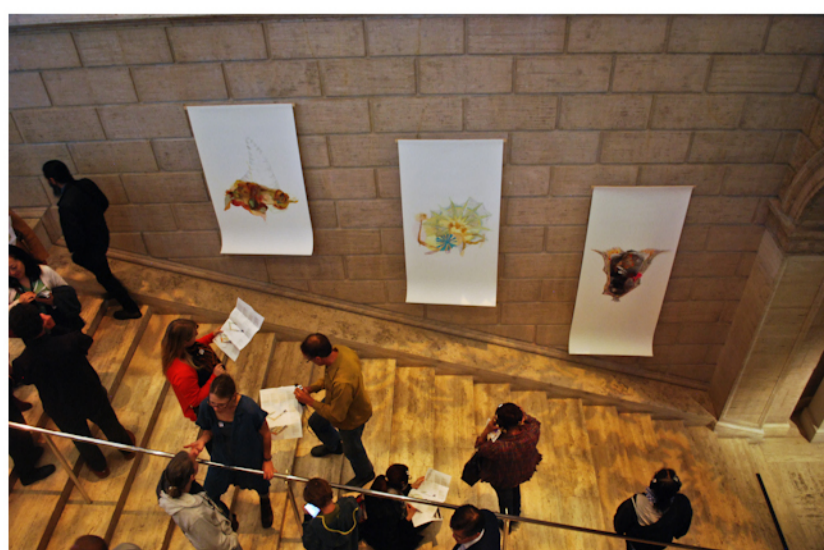
Hughen/Starkweather, "Shiho Sasaki, Album of Lacquer" (2014)

Accompanying the map was a paper with a few questions, inviting the viewer to continue the kind of engagement the artists had started with AAM's staff. "An Invitation ...," as it was called, asked four simple questions about an important artwork in our lives, and visitors could submit their answers to be featured on the museum's website. Like the map, which turned the museum visit into an act of searching and comparison, the questionnaire placed our personal experiences with artwork at the foreground — experiences usually ignored in favor of the "professional" insights of the curator, director, or artist.



"The Hindu deity Vishnu in the form of the man-lion Narasimha" (c. 1100–1200)

How does memory make an artwork? How do our relationships with certain pieces define our perceptions of them? Do any two people actually see and feel the same way before the same work of art? These are the important questions that "Re:depiction" both raised and complicated. We tend to think of artworks as static and finite objects, especially in historical and encyclopedic institutions like the AAM. The Artists Drawing Club proves that notion wrong, and seeks instead to reinvigorate the collection with a new sense of curiosity and exploration.



"Re:Depiction" at the Asian Art Museum

Hughen/Starkweather's "Re:Depiction" took place at the Asian Art Museum (200 Larkin Street, San Francisco) on May 22, 6:30–9pm. The Artists Drawing Club happens on the fourth Thursday of every month at the museum.

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