

OPEN SOURCE

LESLIE ROBISON uses mixed-media to crack the codes of artistic and power systems

The current exhibit at Crisp-Ellert Art Museum (CEAM) features works that are indicative of the skills, diversity and vision of art instructors currently residing in Northeast Florida. The *Department of Art and Design Faculty Exhibition* includes works by Luciana Gassett, Diana Lodi, Don Martin, Laura Mongiovi, Patrick Moser, Sara Pedigo and Chris Smith and Natalie Stephenson. Like other area colleges — including Jacksonville University, University of North Florida and Florida State College of Jacksonville — Flagler College’s art and design department is housed by faculty as skilled at generating impressive contemporary art as they are in fulfilling their roles as academics: informing, guiding and encouraging the next wave of artists toward producing valid and potent work.

All of the featured artists are worthy of attention, but one notable stand-out is Leslie Robison.

Adept at using media ranging from drawing and painting to video work and site-specific installations, Robison implements these means to address

her personal and professional connection to contemporary visual art. “I am interested in breaking down the language, symbols and actions that define power in various relationships, especially within the institutions of art and academia,” says Robison. “I use drawing in various media as a performative means of investigating these structures and my own role within them, allowing the work to be both critical and self-mocking.”

A group of pieces included in the CEAM exhibit utilize text, one way that Robison delves into the process of exploring, 22 | FOLIOWEELY.com | MARCH 18-24, 2015

dismantling and reconfiguring these aforementioned concepts. *Moth* and *Con Tent* (both oil on canvas) feature light blue backgrounds with their titular words in black text, with red cursive lettering morphing their meanings. “By transforming the word ‘moth’ into ‘mother’ into ‘smother’ and finally into ‘other,’ for example, I am able to demonstrate to the viewer how the words slip and slide in my own mind and also reveal something about my state of mind,” explains Robison. “In these paintings, I also get to scribble, and scribbling is a part of the language of art — like Jackson Pollock or Cy Twombly for example — but they’re also anti-language. They can fight the authority of words.”

Robison takes aim at semantics and what could be viewed as masculine expressions of power with *Snowblind*. Balls of yellow yarn descend the wall on single strings, as the word “Snowblind” is drawn from these streams of interlocked fibers. “In this piece, the yellow lines of yarn and floss extend from men’s underwear to the floor. I was thinking about the

potential men possess to write their names in the snow,” says Robison, of a work that addresses a kind of male bonding, a rite of passage in creating “language” out of urine. “And I think it symbolizes a slant in language in general that is ideologically hidden, so the compound of snow and blind takes on a new meaning.”

Patriarchal power trips are more directly attacked in *Stream*, a mass of phallus-shaped objects, knitted from yarn, that are attached to the wall and spray downward into white and yellow tendrils on the gallery floor. *I Don’t*

Use the Accident, I Deny the Accident (found imagery and graphite on paper), with its black-and-white close-ups of men in underwear, peeing out black streams, also seems to address ideas of “manliness.”

Previous works by Robison have employed this same motif of sex/genitalia/bodily fluids, but these themes, like her investigations into the etymology and plasticity of language, travel deeper than mere shock value. “Much of the reason I use phalluses or allude to the acts of urination or defecation has to do, again, with language. Language is a tool of authority, and power is often expressed in sexual terms — our language is loaded with demeaning words and phrases associated especially with sex. Does it ever occur to anyone that phrases like ‘fuck you’ and ‘we are so screwed,’ for example, favor the holder of the phallus?”

Robison’s work is surely strong because she is confident in her concepts and approach, harnessing that same assuredness into how she translates these substantial ideas into finished pieces that draw strength from their very minimal, albeit effective, elements. And her achievements haven’t gone unnoticed. After earning a BA (1989) and BFA (1996) from Washington State University, in 2001, Robison earned an MFA from University of Florida. She has received several fellowships, grants and awards and led workshops and panel discussions throughout the Southeast. Her work has been shown in more than 30 group and solo exhibits. “I don’t think I have any particular strategy,” she says of these accomplishments. “Artists are just compelled to make things and disseminate little bits of visual information.”

A longtime arts educator, Robison is currently the Department Chair of Flagler’s Department of Art & Design, where she teaches 11 courses, with a focus on drawing and painting. While walking the creative line of artist/teacher, Robison is aware of a kind of diffusion that occurs, blurring the line between the two vocations. “There’s a direct relationship between my role as a college professor and my studio practice that has to do with being an artist and academic simultaneously,” she explains. “A lot of my work is about this conundrum, since artistic

practice is serious research, but in a campus environment, it isn’t usually perceived as being in the same realm as other types of research — the kind that ends in published books, for example.”

In the same way that Robison draws out new insights from merging her mark onto templates of language, symbols and power structures, she ultimately extracts a greater understanding of visual art by sharing her knowledge, and what she continues to learn, with her students.

“I think that teaching has made me a much better artist. I am constantly asking my students to do things, to take risks, to experiment, to invest and to conceptualize,” says Robison. “And I cannot ask them to do something that I cannot do myself. I not only have to model those qualities in my own practice, but I also have to dissect them and figure out how to explain them. For example, how do you explain the value of failure? You have to try to fail on your own first. And that seems contradictory to some extent — trying and failing? But what it really is, is freedom; it’s rock-bottom permission. And that’s what makes being an artist who teaches or a teacher who makes art really exciting and rewarding.”

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**LESLIE ROBISON featured in the
FLAGLER COLLEGE DEPARTMENT OF
ART & DESIGN FACULTY EXHIBITION**
Crisp-Ellert Art Museum,
48 Sevilla St., St. Augustine,
flagler.edu/news-events/crisp-ellert-art-museum
The exhibit runs through April 17.