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MARTIN-MULLEN ART GALLERY

- SUNY ONEONTA FINE ARTS CENTER -

MILK TONGUE

January 24 - March 11, 2023

Reception

Thursday, February 2, 5-7PM

Panel discussion

Friday, February 3, 1-2pm

Artists

Tirtzah Bassel Madeline Donahue Kyrin Hobson Rose Nestler Suzanne Schireson

Curated by

Ashley Cooper and Carrie Mae Smith

Martin-Mullen Gallery

SUNY Oneonta Fine Arts Center 116 Ravine Parkway Oneonta, NY 13820

Gallery hours

Tuesday-Saturday, 11am-4pm

The Galleries at SUNY Oneonta are a place to explore different experiences and opinions, and the exhibitions, artists, and art we host are selected to further education and provoke empathetic discussion and thought. We aim to create a space that is inclusive to all, both for our student body and community. While some of the art we display can be challenging, we trust our community to respond thoughtfully and to take this as an opportunity to see the world from a different perspective.

Milk Tongue is a timely exhibition that includes work by five talented contemporary artists: Tirtzah Bassel, Madeline Donahue, Kyrin Hobson, Rose Nestler, and Suzanne Schireson. Curated by two of our Art faculty members, Ashley Cooper and Carrie Mae Smith, it not only demonstrates a range of artistic methods and mediums, but also shows the power of art to speak about broad topics and socio-political issues. This exhibition, themed around the female perspective on birthing and mothering, includes moments of gravity, humor, intimacy, and deeply personal love, often with a decidedly feminist stance. It explores memory, history, lived experience, and longing and should be viewed with our shared essential humanity in mind.

Sarah Simpson

Gallery Director
Galleries at SUNY Oneonta



Introduction from the Curators

Ashley Cooper & Carrie Mae Smith

For hundreds of years male artists have been depicting motherhood in an idealized way, completely divorced from reality. It's left an art historical record that says little about childbirth as experienced by women with no authentic representation of the dangers and difficulties associated with birthing. Since the beginning of time, women have given birth, or all too often, died trying. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the maternal mortality rate was around 4%.¹ Considering that a woman might give birth to several children, becoming a mother represented a transition into adulthood every bit as perilous as that of a young man marching off to war. Yet, while the heroism of men in war is a common subject of art, mothers are much more likely to be depicted as innocent and humble, rather than strong and courageous.

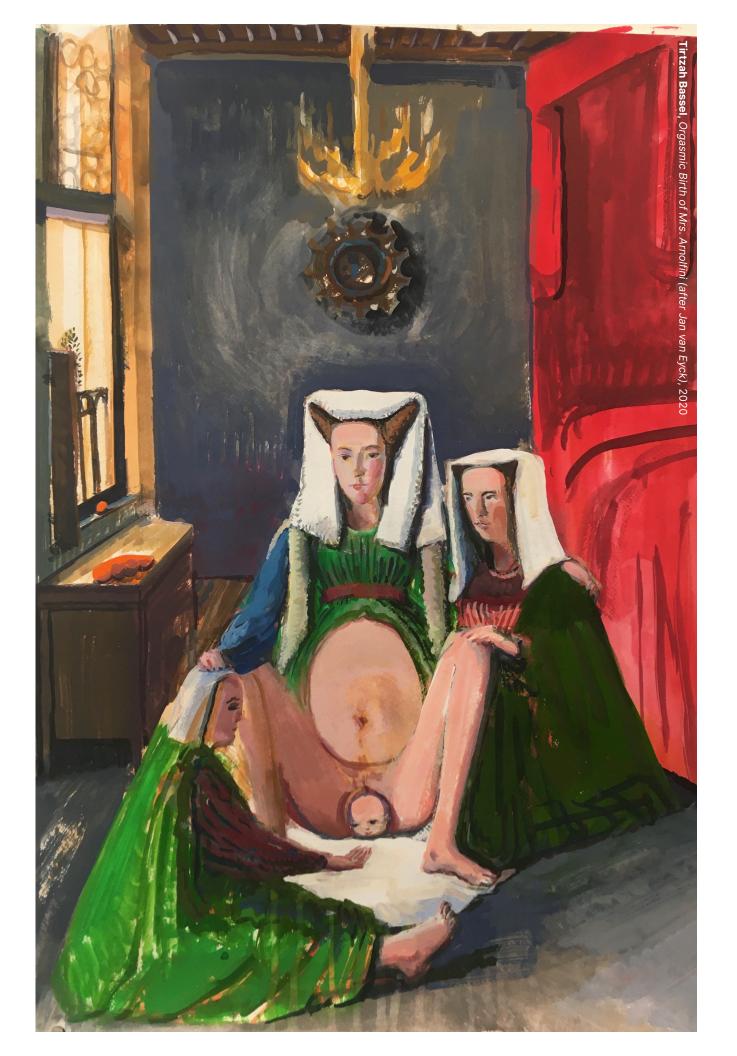
Motherhood, as experienced by women, has been an undervalued subject in western art and it continues to be a contentious and precarious topic and position to navigate in the commercial and professional art arenas. How can something so essential to human existence be sidestepped and disregarded?

Milk Tongue, challenges familiar archetypes of motherhood through artworks created by women who have given birth and practiced or are practicing mothering—the messy, painful, embarrassing, and sometimes humorous experiences of bringing new life into the world. The artists in this exhibition use motherhood as a lens to examine historical and contemporary social issues (reproductive rights, capitalism, racism, freedom) and expand our understanding of the term "motherhood."

We started working on this exhibition in the fall of 2019, before the recent pandemic. Postponed until now, January 2023, *Milk Tongue* is being presented in a post-Roe era. We believe the subject of motherhood deserves significant attention and discussions from all perspectives, especially from those who experience it first-hand. Thank you to Tirtzah Bassel, Madeline Donahue, Kyrin Hobson, Rose Nestler, and Suzanne Schireson for lending your work to be part of this exhibition and the range of perspectives that you share. A heartfelt and big thank you to Sarah Simpson, Gallery Director at SUNY Oneonta, for your belief in this exhibition, for your expertise, organization, and countless hours of preparation. A big thank you to Sallie Han, mother and Professor of Anthropology at SUNY Oneonta who generously contributed an insightful essay for this catalog. Thank you to Stephanie Mallen and Tara Tassio, the students who designed this catalogue. And a big, big thank you to the many individual donors who support the galley, the Foundation at SUNY Oneonta, the President's Office, Provost's Office, Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Business, Art Department Chair, and Gallery Advisory Committee for their generous support that greatly assisted in producing this exhibition, catalogue, and panel discussion.

Ashley Cooper & Carrie Mae Smith

¹ Laura Helmuth, Slate.com, https://slate.com/technology/2013/09/death-in-childbirth-doctors-increased-maternal-mortality-in-the-20th-century-are-midwives-better.html, September 10, 2013.



Seeing Reproduction Anew: An Anthropologist's Notes on *Milk Tongue*

Sallie Han, Professor of Anthropology, SUNY Oneonta

Ask the mothers. They know, have known. If you are new to an understanding of reproduction, then welcome! Please also realize that just because the bearing, birthing, and bringing up of beings into this life may be a sight that startles your intelligence does not, however, make these facts and feats unknown. Approach your understanding of human becoming not as a discovery, but a recovery and a revelation. In coming to this knowledge, which may be new to you, consider how and why it has been kept, both in the sense that it may have been deliberately concealed or withheld as well as that it also has long been cultivated and passed along.

Just ask the anthropologists and the artists. In both disciplines, it is the practice to take seriously the knowledge that is misrecognized as not knowledge at all, often deliberately so because it is dismissed as merely the experiences of the segments of humanity actively kept undervalued and overlooked. Anthropology in particular is founded in the historically uninvited examination of people made racialized, classed, gendered, and less-than Others. This is a necessary acknowledgement from which the project of decolonizing anthropology can begin, moving toward a truer and more complete view of our human selves. A renewed vision of being human requires our inclusion of the part of humanity that carries the capacity to animate the whole of us, as feminists long have asserted. We cannot succeed in our understanding of humans unless we talk and think about mothers, motherhood, and mothering.

Anthropologists work in, of, and from various human media, including our bodies and their remains, the range of materials in which our unwritten histories are nevertheless inscribed, and the invisibilia of thought, habit, belief, feeling, practice, and expression that we call language and culture. Artists, too, generate in, of, and from the stuff, sounds, and sights of living and bring it anew to our attention. Seeing Tirtzah Bassel's *Amphora with Orgasmic Birth* or *Orgasmic Birth of Mrs. Arnolfini (after Jan van Eyck)* is like letting one's eyes readjust to light after having been blindfolded for a game or a surprise. The viewer is dazzled, then gradually accustomed to their renewed vision of these canonical works of European art, which have been reimagined and reimaged to portray the experiences of living frequently left in the dark.

¹ Faye Harrison, amplifying the work of Bernard Magubane and James Faris in her pathbreaking volume, Decolonizing Anthropology, asserts "a genuine science of humankind based upon premises of freedom and equality cannot emerge until the anthropology born of the rationalist and liberal intellectual tradition is destroyed" (Harrison 1997: 1).

² Adrienne Rich (1976) distinguished between motherhood as an institution and motherhood as an experience. Other feminists now refer to "mothering" to describe the experience and practice (O'Reilly 2007). Michelle Walks (2011) discusses the challenges of defining what is mothering from the perspective of anthropology, given the diversity of ideas and practices across cultures.

The title of this exhibition is taken from Hélène Cixous' essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in which she writes about the power and promise of bodies reproducing. Writing at a moment when some feminist thinkers were confronting what they saw as their only choice and chance—to become and be mothers or to be free—Cixous (1976: 890) looked past and saw: "If there's a risk there's not an inevitable trap." The problems rest in minds, the solutions to be found elsewhere: "Let us demater-paternalize rather than deny woman, in an effort to avoid the co-optation of procreation, a thrilling era of the body" (Cixous 1976: 890). The astonishments of birthing and breastfeeding are explored in works like Madeline Donahue's *Sphynx* and *Pommel*. Bodies appear bright and bold as babies emerge from their mothers and remerge with their breasts. The images illustrate Cixous' hopeful embrace of difference and differentiation as forms paradoxically not of separation, but completion: "The child is the other, but the other without violence, bypassing loss, struggle" (Cixous 1976: 890-1).

Yet, the completeness of understanding requires we know that violence and loss, too, shape reproduction. Kyrin Hobson's *Mwen Voye Tèt Mwen* evokes the histories of forced sterilization and specifically nonconsensual hysterectomy of Black as well as Latina and indigenous women in the United States.³ It also calls to mind that Black women today are twice as likely as white women in the U.S. to have their uteruses removed as a treatment for uterine fibroids.⁴ Telling such truths is a part of the continuing struggle for reproductive justice. Still, Hobson's work leaves space for interpretation. The uterus is slipping from the reach of the central figure's fingers, but is it being cast or pulled away? What is the tentacled creature lurking in the water which appears to be both reaching for and monstrously mirroring the uterus? The ambiguities and ambivalences surrounding reproduction also need to be acknowledged.

Human reproduction is social and cultural as well as sexual (involving female and male biologies). Importantly, mothers include women, but not all and not only. Biological anthropologists have referred to allomothering ("allo" coming from the Greek for "other") and more recently to alloparenting in order to describe the range of persons who undertake the diverse efforts and cares of raising the next generation.⁵

³ Dorothy Roberts (1997) examines the harsh constraints on the reproductive agency of Black women in the U.S. While Black women in the twentieth century were forcibly sterilized, enslaved women were raped and forced to bear children. Leith Mullings (2021) describes these conditions as the necropolitics of reproductions.

⁴ Naomi F. Fields, Efosa Enoma, and LaShyra Nolen (2022) trace a line between the history of Black women's forced sterilization and their much higher likelihood of having a hysterectomy to treat even benign uterine fibroids.

⁵ Kristen N. Herlosky and Alyssa N. Crittenden (2021) provide an excellent overview of the anthropological literature on alloparenting and cooperative childrearing.





From both evolutionary and cross-cultural perspectives, exclusive or intensive motherhood appears to be the exception, not the rule, observed in what social psychologists call Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic, or WEIRD, societies like the U.S. Rose Nestler's *Night Feeding* presents a provocative yet playful comment on mothering and parenting in our consumerist, late capitalist society. Large, handled bags stand on stocking feet for human figures. Prominently displayed is a feeding bottle, which holds out the promise of sustenance for infants and sleep for adults working on post-industrial time.

Our biologies are not our destinies, but they are our experiences. To become and be mothers, to enter into motherhood, and to mother are significantly matters of the body, as represented in Suzanne Schireson's *Maquette*. In the painting, an adult leans over a child who is big enough to be seated on its mother's lap and small enough to suckle at her breast. The mother appears to be seated on an overturned crate, with the rough lines of tomato cages in the corner behind and a bicycle hanging upside down indicating she is sitting in a garage or shed, a manger of modern life. To the side is what appears to be a sculpture or rather a maquette, or model for a larger work, mirroring the posture of the adult and child at the center of the painting. Mothers and artists make whatever efforts they must wherever they must.⁶

In anthropology as in art, the aim is not only to express, but also to enliven our understanding of human experience. Here, in this exhibition, the focus is on reproduction, which turns out to be magnificently generative, as we find in these works. From what the artists already know about mothers, motherhood, and mothering, they bring forth recombinations of the past so that we can see and remake these experiences anew. The present is pregnant.

Biography

Sallie Han is the mother of two children and Professor of Anthropology at SUNY Oneonta. She is the author of *Pregnancy in Practice: Expectation and Experience in the Contemporary United States* and the co-editor of *The Anthropology of the Fetus: Biology, Culture, and Society* and *The Routledge Handbook of Anthropology and Reproduction*.

⁶ For mothers, home is always a place of work and during a pandemic, also a school.



Works Cited

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Tirtzah Bassel

Born in Boston, MA; based in Brooklyn, NY

tirtzahbassel.com

Tirtzah Bassel is a visual artist based in Brooklyn, NY. Her figurative paintings and site-responsive installations draw attention to the presumed neutrality of ubiquitous spaces like airports and supermarkets, and Canon in Drag – a series of paintings in the style of iconic artworks – subverts the authority of canonical images through gender flipping and altered narratives.

Solo exhibitions and site responsive installations include Slag Gallery, New York, NY (2022, 2018, 2014); Galerie Thomas Fuchs, Stuttgart, Germany (2018); Ortega y Gasset Projects, Brooklyn, NY (2018); and BRIC Arts Media Center, Brooklyn, NY (2016). Recent projects include Platform in partnership with David Zwirner Gallery (2022); Natasha Arselan Gallery, London, UK (2022); and Martha's Contemporary, Austin TX (2022). Selected group exhibitions include Kunstverein Viernheim, Germany (2017); and *Home Land Security* organized by the FOR-SITE Foundation, California (2018). Bassel received an MFA from Boston University and studied drawing and painting at the Jerusalem Studio School in Israel. She is a faculty member in the Visual and Critical Studies Department at the School of Visual Arts in New York and a resident artist in the Chashama Workspace Program in Brooklyn. Bassel is represented by Slag Gallery in New York and Galerie Thomas Fuchs, Stuttgart, Germany.





Madeline Donahue

Born in Houston, TX; based in Brooklyn, NY

madelinedonahue.com

Madeline Donahue makes paintings, drawings, and ceramics that center on her experiences of pregnancy, birth, motherhood, and owning a postpartum body. Her practice focuses on the surreal reality, physicality, emotionality, and interdependence of these experiences. Intimacy is at the core of her work, addressing the simultaneous existence of abject and sublime facets implicit in the relationship with her children and body. These explorations detail these experiences – working through the isolation, fatigue, failure, anxiety, and joys of parenting.

She has had recent solo exhibitions at Hesse Flatow, New York, NY (2022); Nina Johnson, Miami, FL (2022); Praise Shadows Art Gallery, Boston, MA (2021); Art Shack Brooklyn, NY (2021); and Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, New York, NY (2021). Select group shows and art fairs include Helena Anrather Gallery, New York, NY (2023); Untitled Art Fair with Johansson Projects, Miami, FL (2022); FRIENDS Gallery, Arlington, VA (2022); Nevelson Chapel, New York, NY (2022); and Johansson Projects, Oakland, CA (2022). She received an MFA from Brooklyn College, NY, and a BFA from Tufts and The School of the Museumof Fine Arts, Boston, MA.





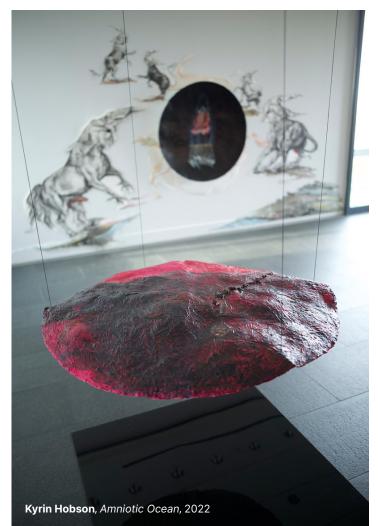
Kyrin Hobson

Born in Los Angeles, CA; based in Chicago, IL

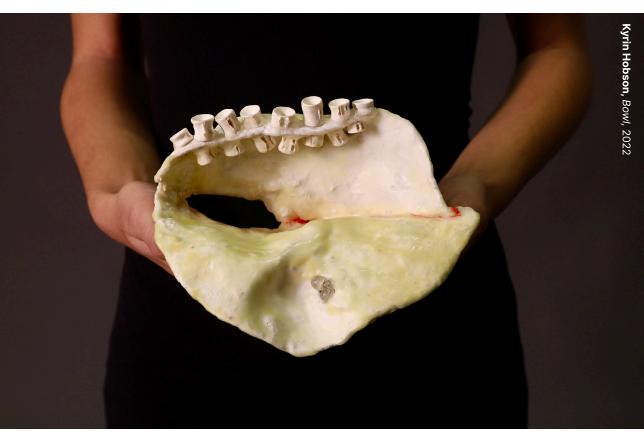
sites.google.com/uchicago.edu/kyrin-hobson

Kyrin Hobson is an interdisciplinary artist and museum professional. Her practice proposes counter-visualities to explore feminist histories of Black and multi-racial women. In paintings, performance, and multi-media installations, the artist draws upon practices of southern midwifery and healing to vigorously advocate for the idea of birth as a common and for safe, healthy, un-forced birth as a human right. Visual storytelling and the design of "spaces of encounter" frame inquiries about how personal family histories and explorations of the aftermath of the trans-Atlantic slave trade can be guideposts for the challenges of the here and now. Through the lens of motherhood as an unbroken through-line of our survival, the work centers bodily movement, ecologies of care, the search for kinship and the ways in which women aggregate, transfer, and utilize power.

Hobson holds a BA in Visual Art from University of California, Los Angeles, a Master's in Arts Administration and Museum Studies from New York University, and is a current MFA candidate in Visual Art at the University of Chicago.







Rose Nestler

Born in Spokane, WA; based in Brooklyn, NY

rosenestler.com

Rose Nestler creates large-scale sculptures that humorously subvert gendered expectations. She works predominantly with fabric, but subverts the softness of this medium with solid, intractable additions like glass, wood, and stone. Most of her pieces reference historical moments and/or objects and her bright, assertive figures often question society and the roles we are expected to fulfill.

Nestler has had solo exhibitions at Mrs., Maspeth, NY (2022); BRIC, Brooklyn, NY (2018); and Ortega y Gasset Projects, Brooklyn, NY (2018). She has participated in projects with NADA House presentation with Projet Pangeé, Governors Island, NY (2021) and SPRING/BREAK Art Show, New York, NY (2019). And she has exhibited in national and international group shows, including Public Gallery, London, UK (2021); König Galerie, Berlin, Germany (2021); Projet Pangée, Montreal, QC, Canada (2020); and Hesse Flatow (2021) and Perrotin (2022), both New York, NY. She was an artist in residence at the Joan Mitchell Center in New Orleans and has conducted residencies at The Fores Project, London, UK, and The Lighthouse Works, Fishers Island, NY, among others. She holds an MFA from Brooklyn College and BA in Art History from Mount Holyoke College.









Suzanne Schireson

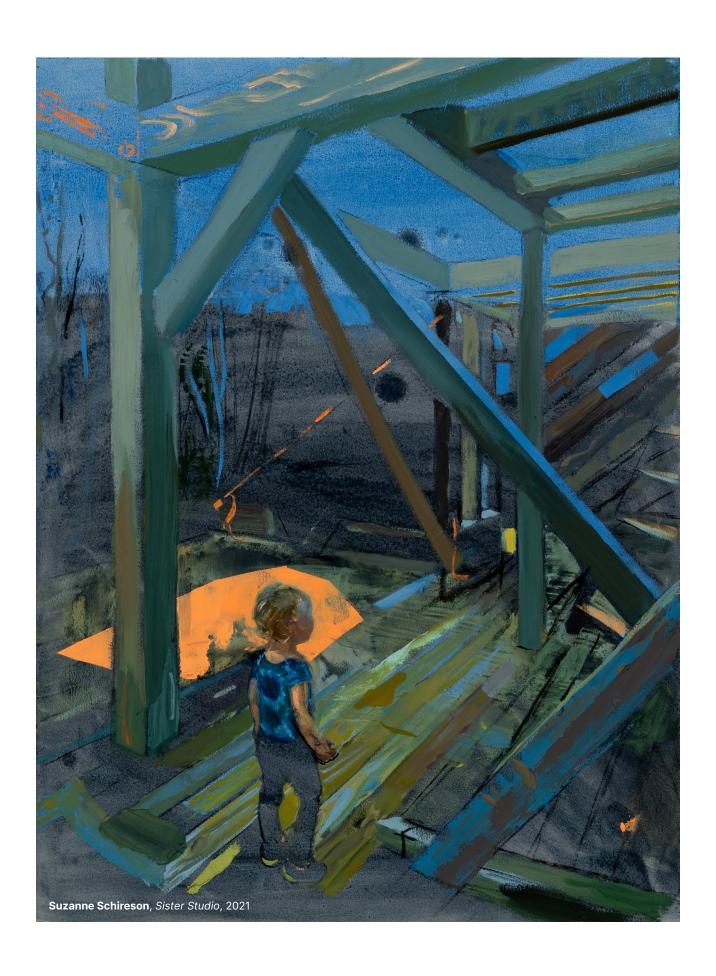
Born in Philadelphia, PA; based in Providence, RI

suzanneschireson.com

Suzanne Schireson's saturated paintings depict everyday scenes of home and work, but her use of tone and detail creates environments that are both personal and oddly liminal. Utilizing a keen sense of movement and color, Schireson transports the viewer into moments that feel like memories or dreams, at once comforting and, at times, vaguely threatening.

She has had solo exhibitions at Seton Gallery, University of New Haven, CT (2022); Tiger Strikes Asteroid, GVL, Asheville, NC (2021); Sleeth Gallery, West Virginia Wesleyan College, Buchannon, WV (2021); and Oresman Gallery, Smith College, North Hampton, MA (2015). Her work has been shown internationally at The Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia, PA; the New Bedford Museum of Art, MA; the Sori Art Center, Jeollabuk-do, South Korea; the Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra, Guwahati, Assam, India; and The Carrousel du Louvre, Paris, France. Schireson is the recipient of a Rhode Island State Council on the Arts Fellowship and two Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grants. She received an MFA from Indiana University, a BFA from the University of Pennsylvania; and a Certificate from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. She is an Associate Professor of Art and Design at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.





Exhibition Checklist

Milk Tongue at the Martin-Mullen Gallery, SUNY Oneonta All works courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted

Rose Nestler:

Lift and Tuck, 2022

MDF, wood, satin, tulle, sandblasted mirror, epoxy $55 \times 35 \times 8$ in.

Courtesy of the artist and Mrs.

Open Lock, 2020

Leather, thread, carved stone, epoxy, and hardware $52 \times 50 \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ in.

Courtesy of the artist and Mrs.

Night Feeding, 2021

Ultrasuede, thread, zippers, Poly-fil, wire, plexi pedestal, and cast glass baby bottles

 $62 \times 39 \times 22 \text{ in.}$

Courtesy of the artist and Mrs.

Kyrin Hobson:

Amniotic Ocean, 2022

Mixed media on Mulberry paper, mixed media on Arches paper, acrylic on Denril, cast paper, encaustic, black acrylic, headphones, and MP3 audio Variable dimensions

Mwen Voye Tèt Mwen, 2021 Encaustic on glass 12 in. (diameter)

Bowl, 2022

Encaustic on plaster form with fish vertebrae and glass cabochons

6 ½ x 5 ½ x 3 ½ in.

Mirror, 2022 Encaustic with mixed media $12 \times 9 \frac{1}{2}$ in.

Tirtzah Bassel:

Amphora with Orgasmic Birth, 2020 Gouache on paper 26 × 22 in. Courtesy of Slag Gallery and the artist

Orgasmic Birth of Mrs. Arnolfini (after Jan van Eyck), 2020

Gouache on paper

26 × 17 in.

Courtesy of Slag Gallery and the artist

Origin of the World [Pap], 2021

Oil on linen

11 × 14 in.

Courtesy of Slag Gallery and the artist

Origin of the World (after Gustave Courbet), 2020

Gouache on paper

 6×8 in.

Courtesy of Slag Gallery and the artist

The Wound (A Cesarean), 2021

Pigment and polymer emulsion on panel

12 × 9 in.

Courtesy of Slag Gallery and the artist

The Nativity (after Petrus Cristus), 2021

Gouache on paper

42 × 36 in.

Peter Amplexu, 2021

Gouache on paper

11 ½ x 14 in.

Courtesy of Slag Gallery and the artist

Flight into Egypt (after Orazio Gentileschi), 2021

Gouache on paper

21 × 26 in.

Courtesy of Slag Gallery and the artist

Origin of the Milky Way (after Peter Paul Rubens),

2020

Gouache on paper

18 × 24 in.

Courtesy of Slag Gallery and the artist

Madeline Donahue:

Pregnancy Test, 2021 Glazed ceramic ½ x 1 × 7 in.

Sphinx, 2021

Glazed ceramic

 $6 \times 7 \times 12$ in.

I See You, 2021

Color pencil on paper

14 × 11 in.

Lying with the Wolf, 2021

Color pencil on archival paper

 11×14 in.

Twyla After Richter, 2022 Oil on canvas 20 × 16 in.

Pommel, 2018 Oil on canvas 20 × 16 in.

Boob Signal, 2018 Oil on canvas 14 × 11 in.

Silhouettes, 2019 Oil on canvas 15 × 12 in.

Party, 2018 Oil on canvas 48 × 38 in.

Parachute, 2021 Oil on canvas 32 × 24 in.

Hi, 2021 Graphite on notecard 5 × 3 in.

Off-Road, 2022 Ink on notecard 3 × 5 in.

I'm Fine, We're Fine, 2021 Graphite on notecard 3 × 5 in.

Salad, 2018 Graphite on paper $3 \frac{1}{2} \times 3 \frac{1}{2}$ in.

Broad Band, 2022 Ink on paper 5 × 3 in.

Matches, 2022 Graphite on paper 5 × 3 in.

Bathers, 2021 Graphite on paper 5 × 3 in.

Suzanne Schireson:

Sister Studio, 2021 Oil on paper 30 × 22 in.

Maquette, 2021 Oil on paper 22 × 30 in.

Night Studio, 2020 Oil on paper 30 × 22 in.

Death Doula, 2022 Oil on canvas 48 × 36 in.

Acknowledgements

About the Galleries at SUNY Oneonta

The Galleries at SUNY Oneonta are dedicated to the exhibition of art and objects related to the fields of study taught on campus and are a cultural and educational resource for both the college and the community. They feature three primary galleries – the Martin-Mullen Gallery, Project Space Gallery, and Open Space Gallery – where a wide range of exhibitions are produced throughout the academic year, complemented by gallery talks and workshops. The Galleries also serve as a student forum, hosting the annual *Juried Student Show* in the spring and multiple open call-based student exhibitions in the Project Space and Open Space Galleries throughout the academic year. These opportunities provide valuable exposure and experience to our students by showcasing their best work. Beyond that, the Galleries seek to draw ties between the local community and the college community, exhibiting local artists and facilitating exhibitions and programs in the surrounding areas.

The Martin-Mullen Gallery is an approximately 2,000 square foot open plan gallery space and is named after two previous Art faculty members, Minnie Martin and James Mullen, through a generous donation. The Martin-Mullen Gallery can be found by entering the Fine Arts Center through the main entrance off Ravine Parkway and is on the left, immediately inside the building. It's across the hall from the Hamblin Theater.

Leadership and Staff

Dr. Alberto Cardelle, Office of the President

Dr. Eileen Morgan-Zayachek, Office of the Provost

Dr. Elizabeth Dunn, Dean of the School of Liberal Arts & Business

Katherine Spitzhoff, Chair of the Art Department

Sarah Simpson, Gallery Director

Cheryl Schwarting, Administrative Assistant to the Gallery

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Back image: **Rose Nestler**, Open Lock, 2020

