



Strange as it May Seem

By **Laurence Levey** -December 11, 2014

Halloween has passed, but strange things are still happening at Worcester Art Museum (WAM). Nancy Burns, assistant curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs, in surveying the museum's collection of works in storage, observed that many had in common an element of strangeness. She decided to use that strangeness as a unifying theme in order to bring those works back into the public eye. The resulting exhibition, "Perfectly Strange," with works from masters such as Goya, Picasso, and Redon, as well as contemporary artists, brings together approximately 70 pieces, including about 10 on loan from other sources.

Art historians tend to avoid the word "strange," said Burns, preferring categories like "avant-garde, surrealist, or cubist." She said that while "strange" can be a "derogatory" term, what we classify as strange is "subjective, based on whether or not things conform to our expectations." And artists capitalize on those expectations.

The first of the exhibition's four sections includes works whose subject matter relates to the everyday world. The second deals with the world of imagination and dreams, the "wacky and weird," as Burns puts it, the "embracing of the irrational." The third concerns itself with spectacle, and the ways we avoid yet crave the strange; for example: the circus, acrobats, magic, and the related realms of Halloween, costume, and masquerade. The fourth section, said Burns, addresses "the problem of the strange," that which might trigger negative responses such as anxiety, fear, or incomprehension of what's seen as frightening or grotesque. This section concentrates on the human body and our issues around mortality.

Contemporary artist John O'Reilly was an oil painter in school. When he graduated, he turned towards working with paper. "Self-Portrait," his contribution to this show, was his first montage, completed in 1965, at a time when he had been working with sculpture and paper. It was the first time he'd put a photograph in a picture, marking a beginning for him, of working with two-dimensional surfaces. His work has gone through phases, he said, "abstract, then realistic, then photography," ultimately "more toward a surrealistic image." He calls "Self-Portrait" a "forebear" of his current work, which often uses "figures from old masterpieces." It has an arm of Rodin, an eclipse, and "a lot of different things happening."

Marguerite White, a lecturer and drawing teacher at the College of the Holy Cross, was also originally a painter, in the 1990s. She started making big wall drawings, and for 10 years has been making drawing installations, large pieces the size of a stage set, using cut paper to create shadows and silhouettes. "I work a lot with stories," she said. She has been inspired by re-reading Hans Christian Andersen, whose stories, unlike the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, were drawn from personal experience, rather than from collected lore. Considering iconic characters such as the Little Mermaid and the girl from "The Red Shoes," she thought, "Why don't I make a formal portrait of these characters?" Using the same process as in her large-scale pieces, she created two smaller works for this show, "in the tradition of classic silhouette portraiture. I took a silhouette of someone I know and cast her in these two portraits," using "cut paper placed on a translucent page so they're luminous." White said the portraits might seem "beautiful at first," but then they're "kind of creepy."

Tad Beck picked up photography at age 15 and hasn't stopped being fascinated by it. His two pieces for this show are from his 2009 series, "Palimpsest," a series "inspired by a strange connection" to the artist Thomas Eakins. Following Beck's completion of a video installation piece in 2003, someone suggested that he take a look at Eakins's painting, "The Swimming Hole." Skeptical at first about what commonality he might share with an artist from a century earlier, Beck became increasingly interested in Eakins, most specifically his photography of male nudes. "It felt like Eakins was haunting my studio," he said. As Beck began exploring what he terms "re-photography," or "taking pictures of pictures," he arrived at a way to "haunt Eakins," by photographing and Photoshopping his own models into Eakins's pictures. In "Palimpsest," said Beck, "I realized the importance of what could be done with photographs of photographs." For Beck, the strangeness of his work lies in the shared definitions of the words "queer" and "strange." "It's liberating to be able to call art strange," said Burns, "instead of beautiful, rigorous, sophisticated," etc. How might you respond to "Perfectly Strange?" That depends. Strange is in the eye of the beholder.

"Perfectly Strange" will be on exhibit at Worcester Art Museum, 55 Salisbury St., Worcester through Jan. 4, 2015.