

PAST TRANSGRESSIONS — ICA'S 'CONFABULATIONS OF MILLENNIA' SCREWS WITH AGE-OLD OBSESSIONS

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Image courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art; Photography by Kyle Dubay

Confabulations of Millenia explores the tensions stirred up when contemporary artists utilize visual techniques and motifs from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Curated by the artist Richard Saja, whose *Historically Inaccurate* series is also featured, the 19 artists in the exhibition all engage with established materials and styles — such as French toile, Rococo porcelain, or classical portraiture — while making fiercely current work. In this process of bending the old to say something about the present, a critique of western art history simmers, as the narratives associated with these material practices are complicated by their malleability.

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Many of Saja's works on view are exquisite embroidered interventions into French toile fabric. Playing against the anonymity produced by toile's monotone, dense, repetitive print, Saja embellishes individual figures within the textile's bucolic scenes, pulling out new stories which feel playfully subversive and queer. The questions they conjure generate a voyeuristic enjoyment: are these untold memories coming to light? Fabrications? Private fantasies? The work doesn't push for answers here, but succeeds just by interrupting the material's historical purpose and sense of a singular record.

Also confounding any notion of history as complete or comprehensive is Kehinde Wiley's *Penitent Mary Magdalene*. Epitomizing the artist's commitment to "quote historical sources and position young, black men within the field of power," Wiley's portrait features a young urban black man as the subject of saintly glorification. The work's adherence to the tropes of traditional Christian painting create fertile juxtaposition, calling out the homogeneity in the history of western portraiture while also reverberating with current dialogues surrounding race, privilege and representation. Prestigious depictions of the black body continue to be history-changing, a truth crystallized by Wiley's recent selection by Barack Obama to paint the former president's official portrait, interrupting an all-white line of American Presidents in the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

Other artists are less pointed or specific in their historical commentary, but instead revel in material mastery. Douglas Goldberg renders the lustrous folds and gathers of drapery in stone. With a skill reminiscent of the perfectionism that preoccupied Renaissance and Baroque sculptors, Goldberg's works depict an object concealed under cloth. Their titles name the hidden item — Microphone, Picture Hanging Screws, Nightlight — all articles of our present time. These sculptures wobble between centuries, their expert fabrication a throwback to our most romantic notions of "art" and "genius"; their subject matter a survey of the modern mundane.

Likewise, Livia Marin's *Nomad Pattern Series* shuttles between the traditional and the irreverent in its craftsmanship. Glazed ceramic white teacups, each upended and cracked, spill out their familiar blue patterns, a trick to the eye that delights and engages. The patterns feel both classic and ubiquitous, the kinds of prints that were once painstakingly painted by hand and then later mass-produced on cheap plastics. Instead of a heavy-handed commentary on globalization, the works call you to linger on their gorgeousness, and mine your memory for where you have seen these before.

Erin Riley's textile works are all intimate self-portraits, operating in high contrast to the historical function of tapestries as objects for public view. Riley's tapestries give us glimpses of her semi-nude tattooed body in the midst of personal grooming, shaving a leg or pulling a nipple hair. It is a private, key-hole view of a woman before she is prepared for public encounter, constructed on a large scale, filling up the wall.

There is much to mine in *Confabulations of Millenia*, each work containing both surface delights and more embedded questions about the art historical canon's construction. The potency of specific visual traditions is inescapable, but their meanings are anything but finite.



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