

Provocative Exhibit Explores National Identity

Written by Carrie Ann Mirfield
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The idea of cultural identity is tricky, and finding a cohesive means to express the guiding principles of being an American in the utterly subjective realm of artistic interpretation is impossible. Even though an “American experience” shared by all of us who live in the United States is difficult to conceive, the current exhibit at the Davenport Museum of Art (with the name The American Experience) seeks to portray a version of our nationhood through visual art.

The collection is composed of works from the days of frontier settlement to the present and is divided into three categories: landscape, experience, and perception. Among the artists chosen to reflect those themes are prominent names such as Grant Wood, Ansel Adams, Andy Warhol, Winslow Homer, and Grandma Moses. Along with these iconic artists, the gathering of pieces by less-well-known artists provides the viewer with a multitude of contexts in which to examine individual experiences in relation to those presented by the art.

For example, the *Fourth of July Still Life*, a serigraph by Audrey Flack, combines traditional patriotic objects in such a glowing, unreal way that they appear ironic. Are the shiny red, white, and blue bunting, fireworks, and sparklers truly the visual elements all Americans identify with when they think of independence?

The Tornado is John Stuart Curry’s depiction of a family cowering as a tornado – a force of nature they can’t control – ravages their farm. This small illustration shows some of the hardship faced by those who depended on the land for survival, but it is overwhelmed by the rest of the landscape section, which focuses on glorious nature scenes. All of the landscapes are pleasing to look at, reflecting the idea – which became popular as the country was industrialized and national parks were reserved for recreation rather than conquest – that nature is something to be enjoyed aesthetically.

The next section of the exhibit is dominated by paintings of sideshows by Marvin Cone, a contemporary of Grant Wood. (The two studied together in Paris.) Wood became famous for his renderings of the Midwestern character and landscape, offering generalized archetypes. Their styles are similar, but Cone’s view is more interesting; his representations of the region and its people – crowds watching circus attractions such as the fat lady and snake dancers – are more personal. With two extreme forms of the female figure, Cone shows faces that range from goggle-eyed or smirking men to proper, disapproving matrons who look like they have

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something sour in their mouths. It's possible to speculate forever on how what we do for entertainment defines us, but Cone could be saying that the reactions of shock and titillation are as interesting as the things that provoke them.

Warrington Colescott effectively shows the hypocrisy inherent in rulers being the arbiters of morality with his caricature of a congressman holding up a sign that says "WAR NOT SEX." Colescott's *Judgment Day at the NEA* mocks Congress' 1995 decision to pull all funding from National Endowment for the Arts to prevent any federal money from accidentally getting to artists whose subject matter might be a "threat" to national morals.

The final series of works in the exhibit is categorized as "American perception." These pieces document contradictions in a society that holds, as part of its creed, "with liberty and justice for all." There are obscured lists of names and sepia handprints that Deborah Muirhead uses to tell of how the identity of slaves has been erased, leaving African Americans with an ambiguous sense of who their ancestors were, apart from property.

The photograph of the doors of Ellis Island by Madoka Takagi is spooky. The doors are decrepit, and instead of a wide "land of opportunity," one can only see a faint crack that shows what's beyond them. *So Far from God: So Close to the United States* is a lithograph by Luis Jimenez relating the persecution experienced by Latinos seeking refuge in the U.S.

Seemingly every imaginable stereotype of Eastern culture, ancient and modern, is represented in Roger Shimomura's *Yellow Rat Bastard*. The images are dense, and in between the two panels is a shopping bag from a store named Yellow Rat Bastard. (There appear to be Mickey Mouse ears poking out from the bag, too.) The work implies that in their eagerness to turn everything into a commodity, Americans will lump several distinct cultures into one trend and start buying. The fact that it is considered edgy and hip to shop at a place named for a racial slur (Yellow Rat Bastard is a real clothing retailer in New York) is an absurdity, the artwork wryly illustrates.

Opposite the works of artists balking at the assumption of a homogenized America is Grant Wood's manipulated portrait of a grim relation, *Victorian Survival*, glaring across the gallery. Intentional or not, its placement perfectly demonstrates the ideological conflict between the prim-and-proper ma-and-apple-pie version of the USA and the realities of a country filled with citizens who have been exploited and betrayed by what empty symbolism and rhetoric try to justify.