

Artist makes Currier Museum itself part of his exhibit

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Questions, questions, questions.

How does a museum decide what is worth collecting? How do these choices affect our view of history? Does an object's perceived value change over time, and through different eyes? How are objects grouped for display? And why is there so much plywood furniture all over the Currier Museum of Art?

Questions are at the heart of the Currier's new exhibit, "Exploring the Currier Inside Out: Andrew Witkin Among Others," which opened last weekend and runs through May 11.



Witkin uses objects from the Currier's collection, materials from the museum's library and archives, and new objects to create a tour of sorts, guiding visitors through the museum and inviting them to question what they see. He especially wants visitors to look beyond the surface, to go beyond first impressions.

You, the visitor, will first encounter an unusual grouping in the Entry: an antique highboy with the tags identifying its place in storage, a plywood ladder leaning against the wall, a rocking chair on a raised platform and digital prints of archived materials on the wall. How are they connected?

What about the large rectangular hole in the wall, exposing lathwork (and no, the room is not undergoing repairs)? You can cheat and read the handy illustrated guide, but give yourself a chance first to figure it out on your own.

"That's exactly the point of the show," said Nina Gara Bozicnik, the museum's assistant curator. "It's tweaking things a little so that they defy our potentially typical expectations, so that we look a little bit harder, think with a little more consideration about what we're seeing and about what we're not seeing, and become aware of the potential to see more.

"It's a proposition inviting us to be more spatially, more visually aware and add a little bit more thinking to what we're seeing – a less passive, more active ownership of what we're being presented with."

Before you leave the entry, take time to watch the video interview with Witkin for a glimpse into the makings of this exhibit.

Which is more important, the function of an object or its aesthetic? Witkin discovered during his research that the museum's Levi Hutchins clock (c. 1810) was named for the clockmaker, not for the beautiful wooden case. No one knows who made the case, and the clockworks are hidden inside.

A decal silhouette of the clock is layered with photocopies of documents related to its acquisition in 1962. The

layers are in chronological order, with the oldest on the bottom. Not all are legible or complete, reflecting the patchy way we keep records of the past.

The finely crafted plywood furniture was made by New Hampshire Furniture Master Tom McLaughlin in collaboration with Witkin. Contrary to normal museum etiquette, visitors are encouraged to touch the furniture and sit on the chairs.

The addition of this furniture to established exhibits changes the way we view them.

For example, the original Tavern exhibit contained a corner cabinet and a tavern sign, among other things, but what is a tavern without a table? The plywood table, which spans the different heights of the display space and the visitor walkway, immediately creates a more authentic experience and symbolically connects objects from the past with present visitors.

Placed next to maple and mahogany objects, the mundane material may prompt the visitor to reconsider its value. It's interesting to note that the plywood furniture is unfinished, perhaps to accentuate its natural beauty in contrast to the more elaborate pieces.

Most museum chairs and benches invite us to sit and face the artwork. But in the Salon, the multi-angle arrangement of plywood chairs invites us to view not only the paintings but also the view across the open columned space.

Speaking of chairs, why are so many crowded into the small Salon, and only a few placed in the spacious Contemporary Gallery? Look around carefully and think about what you see before consulting the guide.

Downstairs in the library, Witkin created a wall display that illustrates the role of viewpoint in interpreting what we see. An apparently random arrangement of rectangular wall decals takes on a pattern that changes depending on where one stands.

In the nearby arrangement of archived photos and small objects, there is a photo showing the restoration of an armchair. The restored chair is on display; it has a new slipcover, and some pieces of the original wooden structure have been replaced. Witkin challenges us with the question: What is the authentic chair?

The phrase "Among Others" in the exhibition's title refers to the partnership that brought the exhibition into being. In both the gallery guide and video interview, Witkin lists more than 650 "collaborators," including museum founders, current staff, volunteers and trustees, and other people, living and dead, who have influenced him.

Witkin also created a collection of words and phrases, arranged alphabetically, that he encountered during his research. He copied them as he found them, including misspellings, to show that historical records can contain and perpetuate inaccuracies.

Bozicnik invited Witkin to participate in the "Contemporary Connections" series, where artists are asked to create new work in response to the collection, region, location or architecture of the museum.

"We wanted to highlight the great resource that is the museum's archives and library," Bozicnik said, "and thought an artist's project based on these resources would be a good way to increase their visibility. The results have exceeded our expectations!"

It's the first show of his, she said, to be so embedded in an institution. His seven installations throughout the museum are based on two and a half years of exploration through the Currier's archives and art, and have created a dialogue about the collection, the organization as an institution, and its history.

For information, go to awitkin.com, currier.org or call (603) 669-6144.