

Turning, flipping and rearranging: Andrew Witkin provokes thought with Currier exhibition

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When Andrew Witkin was given full access to the Currier Museum of Art's collection, archives and library holdings two and a half years ago, one of the first things that grabbed him was the tall clock by Levi Hutchins overlooking the upper level gallery.

"First off, the casing on it is beautiful," Witkin said in a phone interview.

Indeed, the piece offers exquisite detail, rich colors, gold trim and, to top it off, a painting of a hunter just above the face.



"I was originally moved by all the woodwork of the case of the clock."

But what kept his attention was the research that followed.

"I realized that nobody knows who did the case, who made the painting at the top of the clock. It's listed under the clockmaker's name, the man who did the mechanics," Witkin said. "Levi Hutchins is a clockmaker, but you don't see that."

"I thought it was an interesting thing to think about, that something was known to have been made by somebody who made the inside," Witkin continued. "How often do you ever learn about the inside of something? You learn about the surface. You learn about the superstar, not the person who made the song. It was a beautiful gesture, but at the same time, it was incomplete."

So, in one of the seven installations that make up his museum-wide exhibition, "Exploring the Currier Inside Out: Andrew Witkin at the Currier Museum of Art," Witkin created a piece of art alongside the beautiful clock that detailed another version of the piece's insides. Witkin made a silhouette layered in the archived documents the Currier kept as record of purchase.

While thought-provoking — in the letters, the papers and invoice, you can see the exchange before the museum purchased the tall clock — Witkin made the silhouette visually representational, too, as the papers are layered in such a way you can see the shape of the clock's face, the panels of wood and the contrasting wood color, mirrored with contrasting paper color (the documents are of different colors due to age).

The exhibition, which is on view through May 11, is part of the museum's Contemporary Connections series, a yearly invitation the Currier offers to early- and mid-career artists from New England. The museum brings in these artists to create projects made in dialogue with the museum's collection, regional histories and location. Last year's visiting artist, Abby Newbold, created a fictional homestead on the "fringes" of modern society (one piece was a bike-pulled covered wagon), and the year before, Cristi Rinklin made a mural-like installation inspired by Currier's works.

Witkin's installation is unique to this series in that it's museum-wide, but it's also a bit more abstract. Each of the seven installations that make up Witkin's exhibition looks to show the museum's items in new light. Another way is through organization, as Currier curator Nina Gara Bozicnik explained in an exhibition walk-through shortly after its opening.

She started with the hallway right outside the museum entrance. Here there are five pieces/displays to look at: a ladder-backed chair, a dresser, a series of old documents/images, a collection of wall cuts and a hand-crafted ladder designed by Witkin and made by New Hampshire Furniture Master Tom McLaughlin. (McLaughlin also made many of the other pieces in the show; the unvarnished chairs, tables within the installations, were all designed by Witkin, constructed by McLaughlin.)

A guiding premise to the work, as Bozicnik said, is to how information can reveal different meanings depending on the context in which we encounter it.

"All of the elements in here are arranged in these horizontal stacks," she said. "The drawers in the chest; the cuts in the wall; the rungs on the ladder; the ladder-back chair; everything is arranged based on the fact that they contain these stacked rectangles."

This means of organization, she said, is significant; it's not usually how the museum organizes its collections.

"In a museum, you'll typically encounter things that are arranged in aesthetic or historical affinities. ... But here, he's grouping things based on the shared shape," Bozicnik said. "It raises the question, how do we organize information? And how does it affect the way we perceive and notice things?"

While in some of the installations, this idea will be more obvious — downstairs in the library archive there's a wall-length display of the words, arranged alphabetically, that Witkin found within Currier documents during his research — others require more contemplation.

The guidebooks and maps that accompany each of the seven installations certainly help, but Witkin, in the books and in the show, doesn't explicitly reveal his entire thought process in the exhibition's making. (And indeed, if he were to, there's far too much information to explain here.)

"There's no one thing I want people to get from this project," Witkin said. "My hope is that people give it an opportunity to converse with them, or that they take the opportunity to converse with it, to perhaps walk away with more appreciation of what the museum does and a bit of enjoyment at looking at things differently. ... I'm not looking for people to have one experience. I'm just appreciative that they look at all."