

Gregory Scheckler Smashes It Up

By John Seven, North Adams Transcript

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NORTH ADAMS - With his retrospective at MCLA Gallery 51, artist and Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts art professor Gregory Scheckler doesn't just look back on 21 years of work - he's mixing it up a little bit.

"Remixed Messages: Artworks by Gregory Scheckler from 1990-2011" opens on Thursday, Sept. 29, with a reception at 6 p.m. at MCLA Gallery 51, 51 Main St. Coming in as his 100th exhibit, the show will celebrate Scheckler's art-making with an emphasis on his efforts to mix and match images to bring out new meaning and relevance.

"The main idea is to smash things together," he said.

Scheckler's work has been building up to this moment over the last few years, with his Collision Course series best exemplifying the movement of his visual concepts. And Scheckler does exactly that.

By pulling from art history up to modern times, Collision Course features images such as "That's No Moon," which references Magritte, Titian and even George Lucas. Scheckler's painting plays on Magritte's "The Treasury of Images," which famously proclaimed that "this is not a pipe." Instead, Scheckler includes the Death Star from Star Wars and offers "this is not a moon." It's Scheckler's update of Magritte's cynical idea that pictures can - and do - lie.

"It's perfect for today's world, where we are surrounded by millions of images everyday: ads, logos, photojournalism, film, YouTube, web pages, artworks," said Scheckler, "and, of course, we still have all the war and nationalistic propaganda that Magritte was against. I mean, just turn

on the television and watch a couple of commercials. They are all instant surrealism, full of impossible magical things."

Scheckler says that even some of his paintings, less likely to be grouped in with the idea of remixing, fit the bill, such as his series capturing single birds.

"They are composed from combinations of life and nature studies, compositional studies, color studies, concepts steering the poetry of the title, and the placement in a gallery or a home," he said. "With these, there's the raw creativity of finding the initial image, but to that is added the creative aspects of editing and organizing the image, and conflating the titles with science ideas. These are a less obvious remix than the larger, compound narrative paintings." Mixing the arts and sciences has been a major center of Scheckler's movements in mixing disciplines over the years.

"To me, pulling together varying forms seems a natural response to the world around us, and is realistic," Scheckler said. "The human imagination stems from the human brain, which consists of many different and sometimes competing processing centers.

"Visual perception, for example, is a suite of abilities borne out of more than 30 different segments of the brain. We mix and remix, filter and re-filter, every image by seeing and thinking about it - multiple interpretations is the way our minds work."

Part of Scheckler's remix technique comes from his training as an academic realist painter through the general practice of copying artworks from the past. Part of smashing things together relies on if not total irreverence for the works, at least the ability to engage with some portion of that. For "Silly Dances plus O-Ring Problems," Scheckler looked honestly at a painting by 19th-century painter Bougeureau while working to recreate it.

"He chose dopey subject matter. Look at this fake woman: she's totally unbelievable, entirely unrealistic, the wind just so and she is floating on her tippy-toe," he said. "This isn't even a good, rich erotic fantasy - it's about as tantalizing as ads for healthy yogurt. All the skill for something so, so silly. And Bougeureau wasn't really aware of that silliness, his work was supposed to be a very, very serious icon of beauty."

Frustrated by the painting, Scheckler began to look for ways to change it and noticed that the spiraling form of the nude in the painting stood out. Scheckler eventually decided to include in the background a cloud formation that resembled the forms from space shuttle explosions, while the woman spins on through art history in the foreground.

"Contemporary artist defaces antique sentimentality, just as real accidents trumped nostalgia for the space program," Scheckler said.

Scheckler says his idea of fun would be to bring some paints to a museum and rework certain portions of famous paintings, and he points to the online frequency of digitally tampered-with variations of famous art as a sign that other people surely feel the same.

Still, behind Scheckler's jokes is a serious question that he asks himself and others who define themselves as realist painters: What parts of human experience and knowledge are you going to be realistic about? "What do you edit out, what do remove from view, and can you be realistic about anything if you edit too much or too little?" said Scheckler. "Is it just that you're copying what things look like, or translating them into intentional artistry? Or are you going to investigate how the mind works, what we feel about things, what's happening in the world today, or what contemporary science tells us about realities that you cannot experience directly but for which you need a microscope or telescope or difficult mathematics? How will you, the maker of visual pictures, make visible the things that we cannot see but know to exist?"

At the center of Scheckler's queries is the question of what exactly is real. Scheckler believes this can best be addressed in forms like a remix that takes into account the diversity of artistic reality in the 21st century. There is no longer one way to interpret anything, nor one discipline with which to eke out an interpretation.

And while Scheckler's images might not provide clear-cut answers, he never meant them to any how - that's work for the viewers to do.

"As an artist it's not really my job to tell people what the truth is," Scheckler said. "It is my job to prompt the imagination to get us out of the box of the status quo a little bit."

Greg Scheckler can be found online at gregscheckler.com