Women artists reflected in 'Mirror, Mirror'

LIFESTYLES

By Meredith Moss
Feb 25, 2023

Springfield Museum of Art exhibit focuses on the roles we play.

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A couple of years ago Christine Fowler Shearer approached the Springfield Museum of Art with a proposal. How about an exhibit that would focus on contemporary female artists and the wide range of responsibilities they are often required to juggle?

Shearer, an independent curator and art historian based in Akron, says that throughout history it's been difficult for women to work as artists because they typically have so many other roles to play. "Women are constantly balancing between being an artist and a caretaker," says Shearer. "If you look at any female artists, nine out of 10 times they are dealing with many things that men don't typically have to deal with."

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Her plan was to include a group of contemporary women artists who focus on issues of identity and use the narrative of what it means to be female to express their personal experiences in a more universal way. Some of the work, she explains, would be a direct reflection of what they are experiencing. At other times, the work would present visions of different or better realities.

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The idea perfectly complemented Springfield's current focus on diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion. "We want to make sure that the diversity work we are doing isn't dedicated to any specific time of year but is ongoing," says the museum's Collections and Exhibitions Manager Elizabeth Wetterstroem. The proposed exhibit also tied in with the 100th anniversary of women's constitutional right to vote in the United States.

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The result is "Mirror, Mirror," a special exhibition on display through March 19. The title refers to the happily-ever-after fairy tales from our childhood that rarely come true but represent the type of life we are expected to have. "Women also have one face that they show the world and another that is more private," Shearer says. "I hope that viewers also feel that something in the exhibition is a reflection of them or their situation."

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After premiering in Dayton, the show will travel to Virginia and then to the College of Wooster in Ohio.

About the show

The exhibit showcases the work of 15 artists — with over 50 pieces of art — who focus on various roles they play as women, artists, mothers, wives and/or daughters. "The artists I picked all have a story to tell," says Shearer. The art on display ranges from printmaking and photography to ceramics, textiles and mixed media. The exhibit is funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.

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In her curator's statement Shearer says that despite the many inroads women artists have made, their work is still often equated to their gender, often with negative connotations. "That these artists are feminine does not represent a weakness; instead they have socially significant bodies of work in which they embrace their femininity," she explains. "And in fact, it is the intimate aspects of these artists' work that makes it strong, relevant and important today."

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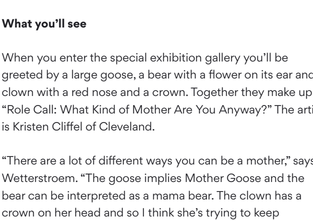
Wetterstroem says the response to the show has been positive. "A lot of people who've never been to the museum have been impressed with the quality of the work," she says. One of her favorite pieces is "Public Private," a small sculpture by Jessica Calderwood, a Cleveland native who is currently an associate professor of Art at Ball State University in Indiana. "It's a piece of twisted metal that runs between two figures that are presumed to be two women," she explains. "One of the women is wearing black stilettos and the other is wearing a pair of striped socks. The woman with the heels is standing up and facing one direction while the person wearing the socks is sitting down and facing the other direction."

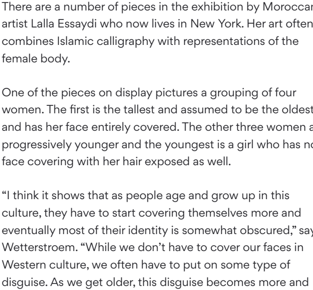


The idea behind the piece, she believes, is that women have different personas. "When we are in our home we are more casual and vulnerable; the socks are more intimate. When we leave our homes we tend to put on a certain appearance in order to be more professional and represent ourselves in a way society wants us to present ourselves. While sometimes it's a personal choice, it's often a lot of societal pressure."

What you'll see

When you enter the special exhibition gallery you'll be greeted by a large goose, a bear with a flower on its ear and a clown with a red nose and a crown. Together they make up "Role Call: What Kind of Mother Are You Anyway?" The artist is Kristen Cliffel of Cleveland.

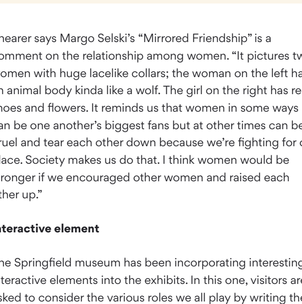
"There are a lot of different ways you can be a mother," says Wetterstroem. "The goose implies Mother Goose and the bear can be interpreted as a mama bear. The clown has a crown on her head and so I think she's trying to keep everything together in a perfect way. She's trying to hold to a high standard but she has a clown nose; no mother is able to be perfect."



There are a number of pieces in the exhibition by Moroccan artist Lalla Essaydi who now lives in New York. Her art often combines Islamic calligraphy with representations of the female body.

One of the pieces on display pictures a grouping of four women. The first is the tallest and assumed to be the oldest and has her face entirely covered. The other three women are progressively younger and the youngest is a girl who has no face covering with her hair exposed as well.

"I think it shows that as people age and grow up in this culture, they have to start covering themselves more and eventually most of their identity is somewhat obscured," says Wetterstroem. "While we don't have to cover our faces in Western culture, we often have to put on some type of disguise. As we get older, this disguise becomes more and more opaque."



Shearer says Margo Selski's "Mirrored Friendship" is a comment on the relationship among women. "It pictures two women with huge lacelike collars; the woman on the left has an animal body kinda like a wolf. The girl on the right has red shoes and flowers. It reminds us that women in some ways can be one another's biggest fans but at other times can be cruel and tear each other down because we're fighting for our place. Society makes us do that. I think women would be stronger if we encouraged other women and raised each other up."

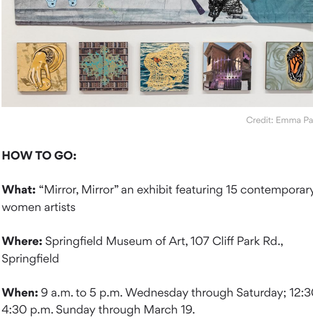
Interactive element

The Springfield museum has been incorporating interesting interactive elements into the exhibits. In this one, visitors are asked to consider the various roles we all play by writing them on slips of paper, then rolling them up and attaching them to a mirror. The slips of paper become a lovely paper sculpture.

"With this exhibit, I really hope people take time to study different types of identities these women have, whether you're looking at basic roles or through the lens of our careers… and how our roles and our personal identities have to be in balance with one another," says Shearer. "That can present a lot of conflict for some people and can be tough to navigate."

She says this exhibition becomes even more relevant when considering the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Women were leaving the workforce in record numbers to care for family and educate children, reminding us that women still face many of the barriers experienced by the generations before us.

"While walking through the exhibition, you will encounter images and narratives that may mirror your own experiences," Shearer concludes. "As you reflect on the artwork, we hope you consider these women more broadly than female artists, ultimately valuing them as significant, contributing artists in their own right."



Credit: Emma Parker

HOW TO GO:

What: "Mirror, Mirror" an exhibit featuring 15 contemporary women artists

Where: Springfield Museum of Art, 107 Cliff Park Rd., Springfield

When: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday; 12:30-4:30 p.m. Sunday through March 19.

Admission: $5 for non-members, free for members, kids 17 and under, and EBT cardholders with Museums for All. Free for Dayton Art Institute members with a reciprocal level membership.

For more information: 937-325-4673 or www.springfieldart.net

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About the Author

Meredith Moss

Meredith Moss has been writing for the Dayton Daily News for decades. She writes "On the Arts" features and the "Make a Difference" column focusing on non-profits. She salutes the volunteers and has received the YWCA's Woman of Influence' award and the Humanitarian award from the National Conference of Community and Justice. Email: Meredith.Moss@coxinc.com

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