

Rollins 360 / ARTS & CULTURE

Q&A with the Co-curators of Fractured Narratives

Amy Galpin and Abigail Ross Goodman share the inside story of the latest exhibition at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum.

BY LAURA J. COLE
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Visitors of the Cornell Fine Arts Museum view the latest exhibition, *Fractured Narratives: a strategy to engage*. (Photo by Scott Cook)

Fractured Narratives: a strategy to engage is the first exhibition inspired by The Alford Collection of Contemporary Art at Rollins College. Cornell Fine Arts Museum curator Amy Galpin and independent curator Abigail Ross Goodman discuss the exhibition, which is open to the public through January 4, 2015.

Laura J. Cole: This exhibition feels different than any I've seen in the Cornell Fine

Arts Museum in the past 10 years. How did it come about, and how did you pick these particular artists?

Amy Galpin: I think the exhibition is different. It's the first exhibition inspired by the generosity of Barbara ['68] and Ted Alfond ['68], graduates of the College who have so generously given a number of works of contemporary art, ranging in various themes, media, and artists from all over the world. Ena Heller, [director of the Cornell Fine Arts Museum], really wanted to create a ... series of exhibitions that are inspired by this important gift. We view the gifts as transformational for [the museum] and for the College, so I'm glad to hear that the exhibition is presenting a new identity for the Cornell Fine Arts Museum.

When I joined the museum about 11 months ago, there was already an idea to take a major theme from the collection. [We decided to] look at socially engaged artists who were creating works that might border on activism. So some of the works in the exhibition are from the collection and some are loans meant to enhance the exhibition.



Alfredo Jaar (b.1956, Santiago, Chile) *Muxima*, 2005 Digital film with sound, 36 minutes, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong, New York

LJC: Why “Fractured Narratives” as the name and theme?

AG: The title Fractured Narratives comes from the work of Alfredo Jaar, who has talked about not wanting to present straight documentary work but [instead] upset linear narrative to create fractured narratives.

Abigail Ross Goodman: I think much like Jaar's work suggests, there are different ways for people to share knowledge and information and to create awareness. One [way] is obviously through a documentary process or an activist practice. But storytelling is also a way that cultures can present stories, reflect on experiences, and bring awareness about challenges.



Dawoud Bey (b. 1953, Queens, New York) *The Birmingham Project: Janice Kemp and Trinita Williams*, 2012 Archival pigment prints mounted on dibond 40x64 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Projects

These are artists who are telling stories using a narrative framework to engage their viewers. The way that they use the narrative framework is not a straightforward storytelling, but a breaking apart of a narrative structure and thinking about all the different ways that storytelling can be communicated while making space for the viewer to have a role. It's not just passive. The works pose questions. They require—like any good work of art does—the viewers to have their own points of view and perspectives.

LJC: You've talked about the Alford Collection of Contemporary Art as a visual syllabus and a collection that improves literacy. Can you elaborate on what you both mean by that?

ARG: The notion of a visual syllabus really came from [thinking about]: What is

our role as a college campus and an educational environment? Barbara [Alfond] and I have lots of conversations [about this]. When you go to a liberal arts college, you're charged with learning about new ideas and considering different perspectives and different fields of knowledge.

I think both conceptually in terms of the exhibition and also the experience of walking through the exhibition, we try to put that belief into practice, so that someone coming out of the exhibition has a different, perhaps more open, sense of some of the issues that are really important in the world right now.

AG: The visual syllabus is certainly very much tied to Rollins as a liberal arts college. We have all these wonderful disciplines taught on our campus, but we also relate it to broader, current issues as we invite the larger Central Florida community to the show as well.

I think the show touches on a lot of issues that are really prevalent in our culture, whether that's censorship, the use of drones, or the aftermath or continuing process of war in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. We have Dawoud Bey's work in our exhibition who is dealing with the past in Birmingham and the civil rights movement. It marks the 51st anniversary of the tragedy that inspired those works, and we have ongoing events where we are still exploring these issues, like in Ferguson, Missouri.

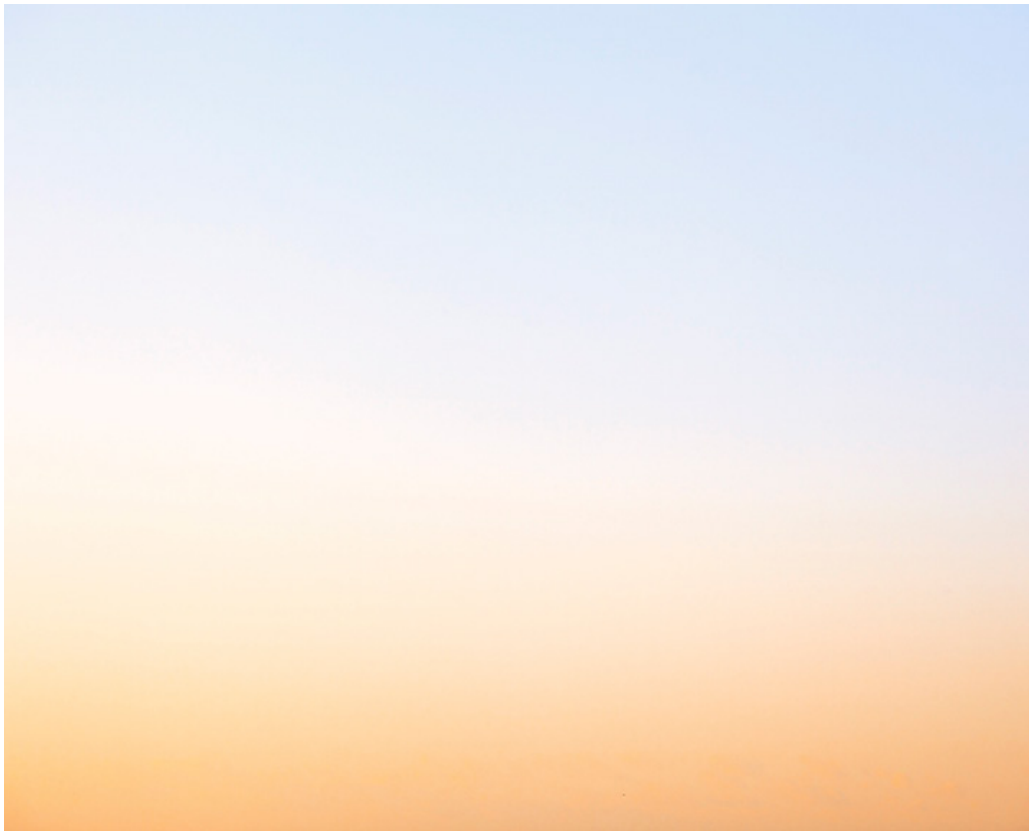
It wasn't our intent to make something about what's happening now. It was our intent to explore this collection and look at social activism among a group of artists. But as a result, I was very struck by some of the social issues that emerged from the show and how prevalent they are in the news.

ARG: It's the kind of sensitivity to the world around you that art can so profoundly stimulate, so that you become more in tune. It puts the spotlight on something so that as a citizen of the world, you suddenly become more aware. I can't speak for Amy, but it's certainly why I spend as much time as I do thinking about and looking at art.

LJC: Can you give me an example?

ARG: There are two works in exhibition that really deal very directly with the use of drones in contemporary society. One is 5,000 Feet is the Best by Omer Fast and the other is Trevor Paglen's work called Reaper Drone.

They are two very different mediums in two very different aesthetics. [The former] is a time-based film that really leverages various techniques of telling a story. It intersperses documents and drama to bring you into the conversation about why drone warfare is such a complicated, loaded issue. It's not something that is so easy. Obviously, we're protecting soldiers who are operating the drones from being in a physical combat zone, but what are the implications of that on the ground where the attacks are taking place and vice versa?



Trevor Paglen (b. 1974, Camp Springs, Maryland) *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, 2012 C-print 48x60 inches
©Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of the artist, Metro Pictures, Altman Siengel Gallery and Galerie Thomas Zander, The Alford Collection of Contemporary Art at Rollins College, Gift of Barbara '68 and Theodore '68 Alford, Cornell Fine Arts Museum

And then [there's] the work of Paglen, where you see this incredibly ethereal vista of a sky at a change of day. The hues go from this beautiful, almost tangerine color to this white to this low-bar blue. And you think to yourself—at first it's just the sky, it's just this beautiful moment. But the title gives you the hint that there's something else in the landscape. When you look closely, you see a tiny little [mark]—it almost [looks] like a

scratch—and that’s the drone that Paglen, through his use of very high-tech cameras, is able to capture and show. And his perspective is that there are so many things that are rotating in the world and the sky above us that we really pay no attention to. And he wants us to question: What do all of those things do and mean in our society?

LJC: Rivane Neuenschwander’s *Zé Carioca and Friends: O Saci [The Saci]* provides a departure from typical notions of museum-going by inviting visitors to write on the artwork.

When *Zé Carioca and Friends no. 2* was on display at the Museum of Modern Art in 2007 as part of the exhibition *Comic Abstraction*, Neuenschwander said, “Each panel becomes a large blackboard, where people are invited to draw or write their own stories, thereby erasing or altering other people’s narratives. This creates the possibility of multiple dialogues, in which the images and texts interfere with each other and with the empty geometrical image on the wall.” Can you tell me a little more about this piece? Why include a piece that the audience is encouraged to participate with or—as traditionally would have been viewed—deface?

AG: The particular piece by Neuenschwander is not a part of the Alford Collection, but it was a piece that we thought was essential to the formulation of the exhibition. The quote that you read really speaks to why it’s significant. The erasure of this sort of



An-My Lê (b.1960, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam) *Small Wars (Rescue)*, 1999-2--2
Gelatin silver print 26.5 x 38 x 1.25 inches Courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York, The Alford Collection of Contemporary Art at Rollins College, Gift of Barbara '68 and Theodore '68 Alford, Cornell Fine Arts Museum

that might promote stereotypes allows visitors to create their own narrative. Joe from Rio, a parrot who was conceived as a swindler, is a stereotype of Brazilian culture. That's sort of the direct reference. Joe from Rio was created when the Good Neighbor Policy was initiated by the U.S. to gain Latin America's support on international issues, and corresponds to a whole legion of Disney characters who were traveling to Latin America. I think in terms of that piece inviting visitors to literally write with chalk [and] erase chalk—I think that's a literal manifestation of what we hope everyone will experience with all of the works in the show. When you look at An-My Lê's photograph of a Vietnam War reenactment, we are asking the viewer to think through that process. What does it mean for an artist to participate in a war and create beautiful photographs?



William Kentridge (b. 1955, Johannesburg, South Africa) Single channel HD video, 7 minutes, Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris, The Alford Collection of Contemporary Art, Gift of Barbara '68 and Ted '68 Alford, Cornell Fine Arts Museum

Most of the pieces in Fractured Narratives are asking the visitors to directly engage with the meaning of the piece. They're meant to provoke thought. With something like the William Kentridge video, it's really asking visitors to come to their own conclusions. But more specifically to your point about why we included [the Neuenschwander] piece, I think sometimes people feel like museums are static and they don't change. The Neuenschwander work is really challenging the traditional motions of etiquette when we go to a museum: Don't touch—certainly don't write on—a piece of art. We're instead trying to create a really welcoming environment, one where people are encouraged to

engage on a critical level.

LJC: Amy, you had briefly alluded to [the William Kentridge video] *Second-hand Reading*. The music playing in Kentridge's piece really drew me into the room. But the illustrations kept me watching—I wanted to get to the end of the book. When it comes to artwork that includes audio and video, how do you create spaces that invite visitors in and encourage them to stay for a while?



Eric Gottesman (b. 1976 Nashua New Hampshire) *Oromaye (Introduction)*, 2013 HD Video, 4:00 minutes
Courtesy of the artist

ARG: I think one of the things that's always challenging about a time-based media work is that it really requires an exchange between the viewer and the artwork. A viewer is willing to give as much time as they feel they're getting something back. And I think the three works—Omer Fast's *5,000 Feet is the Best*, Eric Gottesman's *Oromaye (Introduction)*, and Alfredo Jaar's *Muxima*—that we identified for this exhibition are meaningful and so clearly define the intent of the exhibition. But I think they're also really generous works. They're works that invite you and captivate you—entice you to stay because you want more.

So obviously there are pragmatic things like wanting to have benches and having spaces that people feel physically comfortable in, but I think so much of it is actually having the work that draws you and holds you.

AG: One of the things that is interesting about the presentation of the Kentridge piece is that the artist doesn't want a curtain in front of the space that presents the work. You do hear that music, and you do walk in. That's the pulling of the audience through the space.

Particularly with Jaar's and Fast's pieces—which are longer than the other videos or time-based media—I hope people will feel encouraged to come back and view those works multiple times. You can start one of those works and see the rest of the exhibition and come back and engage with [it] from another vantage point. They're presented on a loop. It's not like going to the theater, where you just have to sit and watch from beginning to end because that's your only opportunity. Visitors can get engaged with [the exhibition] works on a lot of different levels, which I think is really exciting.

Time-based media is a really important part of contemporary art, and I think that the Cornell has experimented here and there with showing video works. This is the first serious attempt to show as many time-based media at once as we are showing, and I think it's an exciting statement for the museum.

LJC: Which piece is most significant for you and why?

AG: I will say that particularly from my perspective of the collection, that having a work by Kentridge not only within the collection that Barbara and Ted so generously acquired for The Alford Collection of Contemporary Art, but that to have it on view, to have it presented in our museum, it's really an amazing thing, and that is definitely a work of art that keeps on giving.

I think the more that you watch those pages flipping through, the more that you look at those drawings created by Kentridge, I think new meanings emerge. That is one of the pieces that I've heard the most about from visitors during the opening week. And I love that because not only is it a wonderful work of art, but it's not an easy work of art.

ARG: I second everything Amy said. I think it's a work that though challenging, people can see their own internal complexities reflected in the language. And they're drawn in by the text; they're drawn in by the visual; they're drawn in by the music. So I think it's a great starting point for how art can actually make individuals viewing a work feel so deeply, even if they can't necessarily articulate exactly what it is the work is making them feel.

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And truly, each work had a special role to play in the exhibition. I think one of the things that was exciting for us is that there really weren't redundancies because we had a fairly tight group of artists to work with. Each piece serves a different role so that it makes it harder to pull out a favorite. Different works are favorites for different reasons because of how they further the impact of the exhibition.

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