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Panel discussion to explore artists' depictions of American identity

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Lebanese-American artist Doris Bittar emigrated from Beirut to New York City when she was 5 years old. Struggling to grasp the English language, she found her voice through another medium: art. In her multimedia work, Bittar intertwines her American upbringing and Arab heritage, tapping into her complex feelings about the United States.

"I love this country," she said. "But I'm apart from it somehow."

Bittar will participate in Thursday's panel discussion "My America" at 3 p.m. in Shemin Auditorium in the Shaffer Art Building. The panel is part of the traveling art exhibition "Infinite Mirror: Images of American Identity," which is on display at the SUArt Galleries until March 20. The gallery opened Jan. 25.

Moderated by the gallery's director, Domenic Iacono, the discussion will also feature two of the exhibition's curators and Japanese-American artist Tomie Arai.

The panel will explore the show's four central themes, all centered on social identity: protest, assimilation, self-selection and pride, Iacono said. The two artists, Bittar and Arai, will also give short presentations and show slides of their works, including those displayed in the exhibition.

"I'm ready," Bittar said. "And very happy to be part of a show where I'm representing Arab-Americans among other ethnicities and other people."

Iacono said he will pose questions about the exhibition's development to main curator Blake Bradford, director of education at the Barnes Foundation, and co-curator Benito Huerta, associate professor of painting and director of The Gallery at the University of Texas at Arlington.

In 2007, the nonprofit arts organization Artrain Inc. contacted Huerta, Bradford and Robert Lee, executive director of the Asian American Arts Centre, Huerta said. The organization called the group to curate an

exhibition aimed entirely at showcasing the work of immigrant and first-and second-generation American artists across the nation.

The exhibition was picked up by the National Endowment for the Arts and finalized in 2009, Huerta said. The three independent curators collectively nominated more than 100 artists and sifted through hundreds of artworks to narrow down the exhibition's list: 63 multimedia print works, including paintings, photographs and video installations, created by 39 contemporary artists.

Huerta based his selections on two criteria: the idea behind the work and how the artists executed that idea in their medium of choice.

Several of the chosen pieces — such as Bittar's "Camo-flag 1," which laces the iconic American flag with intricate Islamic patterns — have a political meaning. Others offer social commentary or focus on family issues. All the artists in the exhibit draw on their diverse backgrounds to explore what it means to be an American in the 21st century, he said.

"We have a diverse group of people that live here," he said. "And we're still getting people coming into the United States that are bringing their culture and their ethnic background into the cultural mix here."

The exhibition caught the attention of several SU students. Jamie Mangini, a senior biology major, entered the gallery last Thursday for a class assignment. Though she only had to study one piece of artwork, she lingered to examine the entire show.

"I liked it because it fit well together," she said. "It was interesting how each piece of work was from an artist of a different nationality."

Mangini said she plans to attend the panel discussion to learn more about the works.

"I've never seen an artist talk about a piece of work that I've looked at," she said. "Getting their point of view might help me interpret it better."

After the panel discussion, the artists and curators will make their way to the gallery to view the exhibition for the first time in its completed form. Huerta said he looks forward to seeing the artists' honest and revealing observations of contemporary America. They resonate off one another, he said, and echo the title of the exhibition.

"This country is like a mirror, it's a reflection of ourselves," he explained. "And there are so many voices in this country that the reflection goes on infinitely."