

American diversity explored through traveling exhibit at Thorne-Sagendorph

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A mixed-media piece created by an artist of Korean descent hangs on the wall next to a painting by an artist of African heritage. Near those hang paintings, etchings, lithographs and silk-screened prints by artists with family roots in Japan, India, Mexico, Lebanon, the Philippines— the list goes on. What they all have in common is that they also define themselves as American.

“Infinite Mirror: Images of American Identity” is on view through Dec. 4 at Keene State College’s Thorne-Sagendorph Art Gallery.

It’s a traveling exhibition of more than 60 works by a group of 42 artists from across the United States that represents some of the many cultures that make America a melting pot.

The four main themes that connect the show are self-selection (the way people choose to present themselves to the world), pride, assimilation and protest.

Some pieces are literal interpretations of these themes, especially Korean-American artist Sungho Choi’s model for “My America.” The model (which the artist used for a mural in the auditorium of a public school in Queens, N.Y.) instantly grabs viewers’ attention for its size alone — it’s nearly 6 feet tall and 8 feet wide. It’s basically a giant ceramic and wooden puzzle in the shape of the United States against an American flag background. On each of the pieces is a different image representing American culture, from cowboys and baseball to “Saturday Night Fever” and the 1991 Los Angeles riots. The model shows how all of these “pieces” co-exist in one nation.

African-American artist Faith Ringgold’s “Flag #4” is an expression of the artist’s memories using pen, paint and paper of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks — an event that united all Americans.

Several works in the show reflect cultures that are the artists' own. Gaspar Enriquez's striking portrait "La Sandra (Sandra la Cholita)," an image of a tough-as-nails-looking young woman, illustrates his Mexican-American point of view in its title alone. Its airbrushed style is suggestive of the graffiti art definitive of Chicano culture.

On another wall is China Marks' "Behold the Messenger, Raw and Cooked," a drawing made with fabric and thread reminiscent of ancient Asian art.

Others artists in the show make it a little more difficult for viewers to see the connection to the exhibit's main themes, including Jennifer Greenburg's large-scale photographs "Donnie Hawleywood" and "Hawleywood's." There's no doubt that these two images are fun to look at. Greenburg, a Russian, Polish and Norwegian-American, discovered a rockabilly culture in the Midwest. Her subjects not only wear 1950s-era clothing and hairstyles, but strive for the lifestyle of that ideal American time period.

Many pieces are statements about American history — particularly racism — including Debra Priestly's "Strange Fruit 12," a comment on slavery. Native-American artist Edgar Heap of Birds' piece "Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi" spells it out in black and white within the image: "We Don't Want Indians/Just Their Names/Mascots/Machines/Cities/Products/Buildings."

What this show suggests is that what makes someone an American is the traits that make that person unique, or what that artist brings to the table.

Japanese-American artist Scott Tsuchitani, whose three digital prints and an etching are on display in the show, explains it best in his online artist statement: "My work is in part about creating space from the margins of the mainstream, creating space in the culture — whether it be that of family, civic community or corporate media — for all of us to be just as we are, rather than how the dominant culture tells us to be."

"Infinite Mirror: Images of American Identity," is on display through Sunday, Dec. 4, at the Thorne-Sagendorph Art Gallery at Keene State College. For more information, call 358-2720 or visit www.keene.edu/tsag.