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## HECHINGER'S 'RETOOLED' ART EXHIBIT MEETS COMMUNITY STEWARDSHIP



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“ReTooled: Highlights from the Hechinger Collection” is an unusual exhibition currently on view at the Mitchell Gallery at St. John’s College in Annapolis, through Feb. 23.

The exhibition describes itself as celebrating “the ubiquity of tools in our everyday lives with art that magically transforms utilitarian objects into words of beauty, insight and wit.”

The artwork on display is formed from tools, and there are sculptures, paintings, sketches and photographs of tools. The collection was originally owned by hardware store magnate John Hechinger who, according to Lucinda Edinberg of the Mitchell Gallery, “wanted artwork to furnish the walls at his (then) new headquarters in Landover, and thus began the collection.”

There is the “Rake-Back Chair,” a chair-artwork designed by Lee A. Schuette in 1981 and constructed of a rake and turf – materials which look like they were pulled straight off the shelf of the old Hechinger Hardware Store.

“Summer Tool” from 1983 is a wood sculpture in oak in the form of a gasoline-powered lawnmower. There is the Escher-like “Les Constructeurs,” a 1951 lithograph by Fernand Léger of workers balancing beams as they construct a building. “Rinse Cycle” from 1988 is an acrylic on canvas in which the Japanese-American artist Roger Shimomura combines classical Japanese iconography with modern American stylistics and combines Japanese and American culture on their common ground – technology, in this case, represented by washing machines. Barton L. Benes’ 1983 “Tools in Print” has tools such as trowels wrapped in hardware Sunday circulars – adverts from the old Hechinger hardware stores, we hope! And one work, the 1972 screen print Richard Estes’ “Nass Linoleum” (from his series “Urban Landscapes,” and with a photo accompanying this article courtesy of Edward Owens and International Arts & Artists, Washington, D.C.), creates art out of the hardware store.

There I saw an image of the local businesses of Nass Linoleum and Sam’s Hardware in their modern buildings of glass, which reflect automobiles. Yet, the work and the two institutions it pictures have a homey, community feel. These artworks show not just how essential tools are, but also how the barrier between “art” and “utility” can be arbitrary.

Hechinger himself was a hardware-industry pioneer who owned a large Mid-Atlantic chain of stores from its base in Landover here in Prince George’s County. “Hechinger is often credited as one of the major figures in the transformation of the neighborhood hardware store to the ‘do it yourself’ home improvement business,” we learn from the exhibit. Begun in 1911, the stores operated through 1999. After this, a website licensing the Hechinger name operated as an online-only store until 2009, selling merchandise similar to what we might find today in a Home Depot or a Lowe’s Home Improvement – national chains which have replaced community businesses such as Hechinger.

For us at the Prince George’s Sentinel, we cannot help but look at the “ReTooled” exhibit without some memories of the Hechinger stores and how they represented a degree of the local nature of businesses. Many local businesses have disappeared from the Metropolitan area over the past decades: Hecht’s, Garfinckel’s, and Woodward & Lothrop (“Woodies”), to name only three.



Hechinger Drive in Springfield, Virginia, a vestige of the one-time importance of the Hechinger chain to the Washington area. When local businesses give way to national chains, the community feel can prove difficult to duplicate. Photo by Mark Dreisonstok/The Prince George’s Sentinel.



Richard Estes, Nass Linoleum, 1972, screen print created by Edward Owens and International Arts & Artists, Washington, D.C. (Courtesy photo by Edward Owens)

Of course, at The Sentinel, my columns have occasionally written retrospectives of long-time local eating and entertainment venues, such as Little Tavern Restaurants, Tastee Diner, the Old Greenbelt Theatre and Glen Echo Amusement Park. Now The Sentinel itself, the very definition of a community newspaper after serving Montgomery and Prince George’s counties for more than 160 years and 88 years, respectively. This publication is slated to close and cease publication on Jan. 30. When local businesses give way to large national companies, the personal aspect of the community’s relationship to its businesses is compromised.

Perhaps what community businesses can offer and which national chains find challenging to duplicate can be gleaned from this anecdote, told by Albuquerque-based manager David Trigo, who worked as a cashier at Hechinger’s Langley Park store while in high school: “I recall around 1980 or 1981 meeting the owner John Hechinger. I remember that he was expected at the store one day, and all of the managers were buzzing about nervously as if the Queen of England were coming.” Actually, Mr. Hechinger struck me as very down to earth and came right up to me. I remember that he said my name as he introduced himself, ‘Hello, David. I’m John Hechinger.’ He shook my hand and went on warmly, greeting all of my co-workers. He seemed like a real nice guy who was interested in his employees.”

This kind of local and personal involvement is what makes local community businesses so valuable. Such reflections are brought home in a personal and immediate way in the John and June Hechinger “ReTooled” exhibition, which this reviewer recommends highly.