

## On Exhibit: Saratoga Springs Tang exhibit provides more questions than answers

Mixes bees and bunnies with bruises and beer

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Installation view, "Beauty & Bite," at Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College. Photographer: Jeremy Lawson

Look once for the beauty and twice for the bite.

The Malloy Wing at the Tang Teaching Museum mixes bees and bunnies with bruises and beer in an exhibition that prompts more questions than answers.

"Beauty & Bite" brings together recently acquired works by artists Kara Walker, Glenn Ligon, Frank Moore, Jim Self, Nan Goldin, Nayland Blake, Nancy Grossman and William Kentridge.

Most have never been shown by the museum before, including Walker's complex series "The Emancipation Approximation."

Twenty-seven starkly colored black, grey and white screenprints fill the walls of one room in the exhibition. Each panel is disorienting in that it lacks a sense of visual perspective.

"The idea is that you read it like a narrative. The silhouette form actually comes from the cutout silhouettes that you might see in historic homes. In the pre-photography era, it was a really popular art form. So she's playing with that popular domestic art form and turning it on its head by making these really complicated images," said Rebecca McNamara, the exhibition curator.

Swans pepper the panels, referencing the Greek myth of Leda and the Swan, in which Zeus takes the form of the winged creature to seduce Leda. Other panels feature the silhouette of a rabbit with a makeshift bag slung over its shoulder and a leaping fox. Some interpret that as a reference to Uncle Remus' story of Brer Rabbit, where a bunny outsmarts a fox (a reference that pops up again in the exhibition with Nayland Blake's work).

While there are many mythological references in "The Emancipation Approximation," there are just as many historical allusions. Many of the screenprints feature female figures that seem to be either raped or assaulted and the title draws one's mind to the horrid treatment of black women during the 19th century.

Upon first glance, the series seems simplistic, however, the style prompts viewers to confront their interpretations of the work. According to McNamara, some visitors have assumed that the black silhouettes represent black people and the white silhouettes represent white people. That's not Walker's intent.

"The idea is that you're really filling in the narrative and because it's a silhouette, you don't actually see skin color or hair or details of the clothing or even foreground [or] background. Everything is really flattened and made abstract in that way. One of the [things] that I love about her work is that you're really forced to confront your own prejudices and biases," McNamara said.

Nearby, Glenn Ligon's "Runaways" series plays off of that notion. Several advertisements featuring stark 19th-century typeface demanding the return of a runaway are paired with original period images of slaves. They look like runaway slave notices from the 1800s but each describes the artist himself. Ligon asked his friends to describe him and their descriptions are so far-ranging that they sound like they're all describing a different person.

According to McNamara, by putting himself in the position of an enslaved person, Ligon is compressing time and history, making the viewer think differently about the experiences of those runaway slaves.

Close to "Runaway" is an entire room dedicated to Frank Moore and Jim Self's "Beehive" project.

Depictions of bee, cactus and flower characters, drawn in bright, almost garish, colors, line the blue exhibition walls. They mirror the scenes that play out in the film.

The film, which won a Bessie Award, has a homemade quality to it, with a worker bee (played by Teri Weksler) bouncing and dancing around in a furry costume with an antenna headpiece, its feet making ridiculous squishing sounds against the floors and furniture of its otherworldly beehive home.

The film is set in a post-apocalyptic world where bees and humans have merged and have learned how to act from watching shows like "Bewitched" and "The Honeymooners," hence the film feels like a sitcom.

Self and Moore filmed the entire production over two years in Moore's studio and later worked with Boston Ballet to bring it to life on the stage. Moore designed all the costumes and his concept drawings are included in the exhibition, bringing a sense of unencumbered joy to the exhibition.

Beyond "Beehive," another film to not miss in "Beauty & Bite" is the mesmerizing "Tango for Page Turning," by William Kentridge. In it, a weathered book opens and charcoal and pencil-drawn figures dance, run and leap across the pages as dulcet piano music swells in the background. The figures never quite dance together, though they seem to nearly touch at times. Words like "unhappen" and "unsave" flash across the

pages of the rapidly turning book, as do other more abstract forms, giving viewers a sense of a looping process of tearing down and building up, fragmenting the past and pulling it into the present.

Nan Goldin's photography series, "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency," also plays with the past, perhaps in a more melancholy way. Goldin's snapshots from the late 1970s and the 1980s have a candid quality to them, though that's not to say they're all humorous. Alongside one photo of a smiling groom and a crying bride are photographs of women with bruises around their eyes and on their thighs. Not too far away, are snapshots of seemingly happy couples, alongside one of a sunken figure with beer cans scattered all around them.

Goldin's photographs capture both the beauty and the bite that's at the exhibition's core, as does Nayland Blake's work, which is the first and last thing viewers see. In "The Little One," a tiny bunny costume is affixed to a black porcelain head, bringing out comparisons to how bunnies are sexualized in pop culture and how they're seen as clever figures in stories like "Brer Rabbit." As with many other pieces in the exhibition, Blake's work doesn't lend itself to one interpretation and the label copy notes just such a quote from Blake: "I hope that people are willing to give the works time, to allow them to unfold beyond the time that they may actually be looking at them."

"Beauty & Bite" will be open through January 19, 2020. For more info visit [tang.skidmore.edu](http://tang.skidmore.edu).