

The power of first impressions at Tang exhibit

Inherent biases, empathy are themes that run through ‘Where Words Falter’

[Tresca Weinstein](#) | Aug. 23, 2022

Research shows that we make judgments about people before they even open their mouths. Within seconds of meeting someone face to face, we’ve decided whether they’re trustworthy, smart, successful or good leadership material, among other qualities. But once we learn that person’s story, does it change how we feel about them?

In the exhibition “Where Words Falter: Art & Empathy,” on view at the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College through the end of the year, associate curator Rebecca McNamara has created a sort of laboratory for the investigation of these first impressions. One of the most striking aspects of the show is a wall of more than 50 photographs of faces—some famous, most unknown, captured in documentary images, portraits and found family photos.



John Sonsini, “Louie and Fidel,” 2004, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches, Tang Teaching Museum collection, gift of Philip Bruder.

Simply noticing our instantaneous reactions to each of these faces is, in itself, a rich invitation for self-examination, and an artful interpretation of the show’s theme of empathy. But McNamara has taken the experiment a step further by producing an accompanying booklet for the exhibition that gives us more information about the people we’re seeing.

The man with the tattoos on his face is Otter Pig, a member of the Traincore community, a group that travels the United States by rail. The image of Coretta Scott King and Harry Belafonte was taken at the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr. The woman with a beard is a circus artist and founder of her own troupe. The father holding a baby on his lap died of a drug overdose seven years after the photo was taken.



Saya Woolfolk, "ChimaTEK Series Hybridization Visualization System: Avatar Download Station 2," 2014, mixed media, video, on loan from the Ann and Mel Schaffer Family Collection. Photo by Shawn LaChappelle

"The idea is to challenge the instinctual judgments or assumptions we might make about other people, and train ourselves to pause before those judgments or assumptions happen, whether it's

someone who reminds us of ourselves or someone we have a hard time relating to," McNamara explained. "Does learning something surprising about them change that instinct? It forces us to confront our own inherent biases that we don't always realize we have."

The wall of faces is just one entry point into the show's exploration of empathy and how it is expressed and elicited through art. Also on view are sculpture, textiles, paintings and video, all from the Tang's permanent collection, including many recent acquisitions that have not been displayed at the museum before.

"I've seen the way visitors and faculty and classes use artwork in all sorts of different exhibitions to better understand the human experience, to get in touch with their own compassion and think about the urgent issues of our time," McNamara said. "I wanted to hone in on what was going on in those conversations and ask the questions, how can art and the art-viewing experience strengthen our empathy muscles, and how can we take that into our daily lives and use it in real-world situations?"



"Where Words Falter: Art & Empathy" at the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College. Photo by Shawn LaChappelle

Some works in the show speak more directly to the theme, like Saya Woolfalk's mixed media work documenting her fictional universe of hybrid plant-human life forms known as Empathics, and Tracey Moffatt's series, "Scarred for Life I" and "Scarred for Life II," which freeze traumatic moments from childhood and adolescence, both real and imagined. Others have a more oblique connection: Josh Faught's large-scale textile work, "Housecleaning," a piece of indigo-dyed hemp sparsely embellished with political pins and a black ribbon, embodies the kind of sadness you might associate with a crumpled prom dress. When you look into Martin Kersels' "Wishing Well," made from a steel drum, you see your own face reflected at the bottom. Jim Hodges' "Wandering," a delicate glass sculpture of a spider paused midway on a branch, gains greater poignancy when you learn that the artist made it in 2003, as a commentary on the national debate over a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage.

"Some of the artists are very actively thinking about empathy, and others are being interpreted anew under that lens," McNamara said. "All kinds of art can help us build empathy within ourselves and for ourselves. I've selected works that allow for multiple interpretations and multiple creations of narrative, because that's part of what empathy is about—understanding experiences that are not necessarily our own."

If you go

"Where Words Falter:
Art & Empathy"

When: 12-9 p.m. Thursday;
12:00-5 p.m. Friday-Sunday

Where: The Tang, 815 North
Broadway, Saratoga Springs

Admission: Free; suggested
donation: \$5; children over 12,
\$3; seniors, \$2

The mix of staged and documentary photos throughout the exhibition, "adds to that level of ambiguity in trying to puzzle out our feelings and how they may or may not change as we do learn more about what we're seeing," she added.

That ambiguity is central to Laurel Nakadate's series of 31 photographs of herself crying, taken each day in January 2010, from her work "365 Days: A Catalogue of Tears." A response to the unremitting positivity of social media at that time, it "turns that artificiality on its head," the curator explained. "You see this person in tears all around you, and as a viewer you don't know what moments she was crying authentically and what moments she was forcing herself to cry."

The show has sparked collaboration with Skidmore's theater department: Three playwrights will be writing new work inspired by a piece in the show during a weeklong residency this fall, with a public reading to follow in October. The Tang will also be working closely with the college's first-year experience program; by chance, all incoming first-year students were assigned to read Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower," in which the main character suffers from a fictional condition known as hyper-empathy, which enables her to share the physical feelings of those around her.

Ultimately, the exhibition is designed not only to catalyze viewers' own questions and emotions, but also to provide a place where they can share those perspectives, by adding words and pictures to a crowd-sourced community zine-making project laid out in the gallery. The finished products will be distributed locally and mailed to participants. Offering a forum in which visitors can respond to the show and to each other's reflections was a way to intentionally further the sense of connection that empathy can create, McNamara said.

"Empathy isn't about pity or sorrow or hardship, it's about recognizing the full breadth of human experience, not seeing just someone's struggle or just their joy," she said. "The exhibition encourages people to think about that full range of human emotion, and to ask themselves, what does a more empathetic world look like?"

<https://www.timesunion.com/art/article/Where-Words-Falter-says-all-about-Tang-exhibit-17389113.php>