



Photo by Lakota Gulick



Marie Watt, *Companion Species (Calling All My Relations)* Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody.



"Remnants of An Advanced Technology" by Alisha Wormsley



Doug Herren's "Color-Forms/Ceramic Structures"

Contemporary Conversations:

Exhibits at the Hunterdon Art Museum provide a space for community, learning and social change

By Sara Catherine Lichon • Photos Courtesy of Hunterdon Arts Museum

It was a brisk day over the south branch of the Raritan River. Across the familiar iron bridge, the stone walls of a historic mill absorbed the light of the morning sun. When people talk about Clinton, New Jersey, they're usually picturing the famous Red Mill. But across the river from this iconic landmark sits another mill, now home to many contemporary wonders - the Hunterdon Art Museum.

Also known as HAM, this museum serves as a community art space that's seen countless art, craft and design exhibitions and trained many local artists for the past seven decades. And with its thought provoking exhibitions, it's a facilitator for important conversations relevant to today's ever-changing world.

In 1763, the mill ground wheat for George Washington and his troops, and its historic roots are apparent as soon as you walk through the doors. Many of the original wooden beams still crisscross from the ceiling to the floor, and a grain chute still hangs above the front desk. On the National Register of Historic Places as Dunham-Parry's Mill, it went through several owners before being sold to James Marsh in 1952. According to HAM docent Bette Lee, Marsh sought to transform it into "a haven for artists." This haven evolved into HAM, as it began showcasing artists from around the world (including Toshiko Takaezo, Lenore Tawney and Isamu Noguchi, to name a few) while also offering classes for community members.

Recent exhibits are no exception to the high-caliber art in HAM's repertoire. "Remnants of An Advanced Technology" by Alisha Wormsley was the first of the three headline exhibits that were featured when we visited HAM at the end of 2021. Walking into this room is a feast for the eyes; colorful photographic tapestries hang from the ceiling, wall to wall. One can admire the details up close before walking beneath them, symbols of empowerment weaved together with bright fabric and metallic paint. Between the quilts are tables with stained-glass vessels, housing candles and more photographic prints. These structures conjure up images of meditation and spirituality, but also a sense of breaking free of the things that once held you prisoner - an homage to the many struggles of African Americans, past and present.

Wormsley's art explores Black futurism, a genre that reimagines Black life with a futuristic aesthetic - an extremely timely topic today. "What she's trying to remind us is, let the past guide our thinking," Bette explained. "She wants to tell the

future, to inform us, to [have us] think about where we've been and where we're going, particularly Black women." Some of the motifs of African American struggle are obvious (dried cotton plants intertwined with many of the pieces), while others are more subtle (the image of a run-down laundromat).

As for what kind of future Wormsley envisions for Black women? "She's very positive, she really thinks things are going to be okay," Bette assured. There is a forward movement in Wormsley's pieces - her subjects, like Black women everywhere, are walking away from the scars of the past towards a better, brighter future.

On the second floor, "Companion Species (At What Cost)" by Marie Watt was on display. At the top of the stairs, two large quilts immediately

demand attention, one on each side of the room. Words have been stitched together on the quilts during Watt's community sewing circles, where sharing and telling stories happens organically. Each large tapestry is made out of smaller pieces of cloth sewn by circle participants. "Each one is a true fingerprint of the individual who created it," remarked Bette.



A work from "Remnants of An Advanced Technology"
by Alisha Wormsley

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Marie Watt, *Companion Species (At What Cost)* Murzi Morgan Private Collection, Courtesy of Mark Strauss Gallery New York.

From a distance, one quilt reads, "Mother, Mother." As you walk closer, smaller words pop out from the individual pieces: mama, madre, mom... Watt, a citizen of the Seneca Nation of Indians, focuses on proto-feminism (feminist ideals in a time before feminism was officially a concept) and Indigenous teaching in her work. "In Native American culture, women were very highly regarded. They were always equal members," Bette mentions, pointing out the feminine words along the fabric. "And in Navajo tradition, the women held a very high standing."

Watt's work also explores the colonization of the United States, asking, "what would have happened if the Europeans thought about learning and sharing, rather than capturing, killing and conquering?" Bette told me. These themes are strongly woven through the second tapestry, with phrases like "picket lines and picket signs," "ancestor," and "bring some understanding." All words that seem relevant to today's climate as well as the past's.

In each of the exhibits, Bette pointed out subtle details in the work that might be easily missed. The conversation around the art flowed. Marjorie Frankel Nathanson, Executive Director of HAM, believes this is an important part of HAM's role: "As a cultural institution that exists to serve our communities, it's important to take part in the conversations that are shaping today's world. Museums have the ability to address social issues by sharing multiple voices and by presenting work by artists who come from a variety of backgrounds. They are places where visitors can see a world beyond their neighborhood and be exposed to and reflect upon differing points of view and new ideas."

The final headline exhibit was Doug Herren's "Color-Forms/Ceramic Structures." These whimsical sculptures are inspired by antique tools, and very interactive, as visitors can try to guess what tools morphed into which sculptures. But the art



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doesn't stop there. On the third floor was the annual Members' Exhibition, a display of mixed media created by many of the museum's members. The pieces exhibited here are just as high quality as the exhibits on the lower floors, showcasing the immense talent that exists right here in Hunterdon County.

Though not on display at this time, HAM also holds a Young Artists' Showcase each year. Brian Kearney, HAM's Communications Manager, described how this showcase helps raise the next generation of artists: "We're creating that amazing relationship between art and child, and fostering that beautiful relationship for years to come. We're helping them grow into these national or international artists."

Education plays a key role in HAM's mission. Not only the education of future and current artists through HAM's many classes and workshops, but also the education of the public through the bold exhibits on display. Each piece provokes thoughts about the artists and their unique perspectives, the stories they want to tell - and the lessons we can learn from them. "Education is one of HAM's core purposes and is part of everything we do," Marjorie remarked. "In our classrooms we're teaching skills, and in our galleries we're teaching people how to see. In both we're teaching about creativity and problem-solving."

Exhibits at HAM aim to teach us to truly see, to look at the past and use that view to form the future. The conversations born from these art pieces are sure to inspire, spark a change in perspective, and forge a deeper connection with both the Hunterdon art community and the broader world. Three new exhibitions will open at HAM on January 23 - so plan a visit soon!

Enrollment for winter classes and workshops are now open, with classes beginning mid-January. To learn more, visit <https://hunterdonartmuseum.org>.

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