



FACULTY
OFF THE CUFF



LABELTALK

2015

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ART

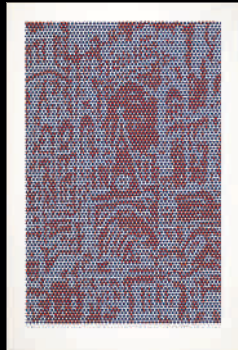


DUANE A. BAILEY
CORINNA CAMPBELL
AMY HOLZAPFEL
ROSEMARY KELANIC
**JAMES MANIGAULT-
BRYANT**

DUANE A. BAILEY
JOE CRUZ
AMY HOLZAPFEL
ROSEMARY KELANIC
DAN LYNCH
**JAMES MANIGAULT-
BRYANT**

SANDRA BURTON
MARGAUX COWDEN
JOE CRUZ
CATHERINE N. HOWE
ANJULI RAZA KOLB
KAREN MERRILL

CORINNA CAMPBELL
MARGAUX COWDEN
CATHERINE N. HOWE
ANJULI RAZA KOLB
DAN LYNCH
BILL WOOTTERS



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INTRODUCTION

2015 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Labeltalk exhibition series.

Labeltalk celebrates the rich potential of art for teaching and learning across disciplines, especially art in a college art museum. The participants — a range of faculty from Williams — look closely at a select group of works of art in the museum's collection, and share their thinking about those works of art with the public, by way of wall text in the exhibition and a brochure.

Labeltalk is changing. Elizabeth Gallerani, the Curator of Mellon Academic Programs, introduced a new format this year: interdisciplinary conversations. Previously, each faculty member, in isolation from the others, wrote a short response to a single work of art. This year instead we formed the thirteen participants into small groups to talk together about the works of art. The conversations were unscripted and open ended, leading down strange paths at times, and occasionally coming to disagreements and unexpected conclusions. The works of art discussed were chosen because they represent well the range and breadth of the museum's collection.

The museum is grateful to Elizabeth for her thoughtful leadership of this project, including coordinating the series of conversations, curating the exhibition, and managing this publication. We're also grateful to the thirteen Williams faculty who participated in and took a chance on a new type of Labeltalk exhibition.

— CHRISTINA OLSEN

*Class of 1956 Director
Williams College Museum of Art*



TOYOHARA KUNICHIKA

Japanese, 1835–1900

Contemporary series of six flowers, 1867

color woodblock print

Bequest of Mrs. Charles Prendergast;
95.4.55

DUANE A. BAILEY
COMPUTER SCIENCE

CORINNA CAMPBELL
MUSIC

AMY HOLZAPFEL
THEATRE

ROSEMARY KELANIC
POLITICAL SCIENCE

JAMES MANIGAULT-BRYANT
AFRICANA STUDIES

AMY HOLZAPFEL: I use this in my class, in Theatre 101, to look at the relationship between actors and print culture in the Edo period and particularly the impact that the medium of print has on the experience of kabuki. . . . And likewise, the print is kind of riffing off this still, static moment in the performance. In a way that allows them to kind of commodify each other.

DUANE A. BAILEY: So you think this is during a performance?

AMY HOLZAPFEL: Well, that's a great question and that's a debate that we have with every one of these prints: is this coming out of a performance or is this just a totally different context?

ROSEMARY KELANIC: It looks like a portrait that's kind of a stately portrait, right? Of somebody who's kind of decked out and arranged, but then has a toothpick in their mouth.

DUANE A. BAILEY: But you don't immediately get that natural quality here and especially if this is an actor, you kind of think, well maybe there's something going on here. . . . You do get drawn into the tattoo and it is amazingly intricate.

CORINNA CAMPBELL: Having a set of six different flowers and everything, in a way those are also character pieces, right? So that brings up a lot for me in terms of, this is a peony I'm guessing, right? . . . Are there things about the flower and the rest of the picture that are supposed to come up?

AMY HOLZAPFEL: The flowering of the actors, Zeami says, really occurs when the actor's like 60. That your life is about flowering as a performer. And blooming and you don't really attain it until you've mastered it for years.

DUANE A. BAILEY: I wonder what kind of messages are sent to the consumer of this image at the time that we don't understand. . . . Does the flower mean something to people in 1860 that we can't understand now?

JAMES MANIGAULT-BRYANT: I keep asking the question, what did he just finish eating? I'm assuming he just finished eating something because of the toothpick. So what exactly was he consuming and . . . back to your point, Duane, what is that communicating to the viewer about consumption?

CORINNA CAMPBELL: And also, is he on duty or off duty? . . . If it's a scene of repose or if it's actual repose.

JAMES MANIGAULT-BRYANT: Where do the body art and the robe end and begin?

DUANE A. BAILEY: It makes you ask questions, whether or not he's tattooed on the other side. . . . Is he in the



middle of undress here . . . ? Is this some sort of fashion magazine statement or something like that.

ROSEMARY KELANIC: And again, I find it kind of interesting because the picture to me, seems kind of

whimsical because you have this sort of flower, beautiful robe, toothpick, and it's almost a little subversive? Or a little like, counter culture? . . . That that would be a status symbol, potentially, is kind of interesting.

KARA WALKER

American, b. 1969

no world (from *An Unpeopled Land in Uncharted Waters*), 2010

etching with aquatint, sugar-lift, spit-bite and drypoint

Museum purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund; M.2010.13.A

© Kara Walker

SANDRA BURTON
DANCE

MARGAUX COWDEN
WOMEN'S, GENDER AND
SEXUALITY STUDIES

JOE CRUZ
PHILOSOPHY

CATHERINE N. HOWE
ART

ANJULI RAZA KOLB
ENGLISH & COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

KAREN MERRILL
HISTORY



CATHERINE N. HOWE: What always strikes me is the delicacy with which those hands are holding the boat. . . . At first it might seem a little bit ominous, and yet it's just so delicate the way it's resting on the fingertips.

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: It feels really richly intertextual in ways that I worry about actually as a critic. Because there's often, especially with feminist art or black art, this kind of will to canonize it by way of its relationship to other canonical works.

SANDRA BURTON: It takes me right back to stories of the Middle Passage, to images of ships where people were packed, and then also that journey and the fact that people drowned themselves rather than make the crossing.

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: I'm really drawn to think of NourbeSe Philip's poem *Zong!*, which is this gorgeous reconstruction of a legal case in which slave ship owners threw their cargo overboard in order to collect insurance.

MARGAUX COWDEN: I also think about the way that landscape tradition often involves no people, right? This fiction of . . . *Unpeopled Lands in Uncharted Waters*, and how much this image foregrounds the people who are inherently part of the story of a place, even as they are erased or murdered.

JOE CRUZ: The silhouettes . . . put me in a kind of emotional position, where the conceptual parts of it aren't the most salient to me. It's more like the position of the woman in the water. That position, I think of myself in that position, and then to have an emotional resonance in some way with the anguish there is what exudes power for this, for me.

KAREN MERRILL: I was thinking about the other residences of that ship in addition to the Middle Passage. . . . Ways that this etching picks up on other kinds of perilous passages, right?

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: I've read recently some interesting scholarship about the gender of the silhouette as a form because it's a kind of memorial form. . . . Like the poetry of the Caribbean, this work seems to be speaking a lot of languages at once.

SANDRA BURTON: I'm thinking about this as a potential metaphor for faith, that it's in God's hands whether or not the ship is going to arrive or perish.

CATHERINE N. HOWE: I'm thinking of Turner's *Slave Ship*. You see the woman's leg in shackles going into the water in the corner, and here you see her under the water without her shackles. It's almost like Kara Walker's showing us, well, what's really happening under the surface.



ANJULI RAZA KOLB: And she's become huge and mythic, unlike in Turner's sort of non-realism realism. She's become mythic in this way.

SANDRA BURTON: Speaking to myth, there's the myth of Igbo Landing, where . . . the Igbo from Nigeria, instead of landing in America, went back into the water and walked to Africa.

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: In Walcott's poem *Omeros* . . . the underwater walking resembles the journey through the underworlds and the encounters with the Shades. But he's brought it into this different landscape that I think Walker is also really beautifully referencing.

IGBO PEOPLE

Nigeria

Ikorodo Mask, ca. 1920–50

wood

Gift of Dr. Oliver E. and Pamela F. Cobb, Class
of 1952; M.2007.1.2

DUANE A. BAILEY
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ROSEMARY KELANIC: First of all, it strikes me as incredibly uncomfortable to wear, right? And I wonder if it was actually worn or if it was just a piece of art.

CORINNA CAMPBELL: I think it says something about performance space. It's not just about your face, it's about what's happening all around you.

ROSEMARY KELANIC: There is a lot of feeling of motion, I feel like. In the top of the headdress itself . . . you can almost imagine it spinning because the characters are sort of falling forward and then these three things look sort of like wheels.

JAMES MANIGAULT-BRYANT: I'm thinking of the birth of a people and I wonder if the mask is telling a story of the Igbo in the midst of the British going into this particular part of Africa and dividing up ethnic groups for their own purposes.

DUANE A. BAILEY: I know nothing about masks, but it seems to me that this is something that reflects the artist, right? . . . You can imagine the artist is sitting here carving and they're testing it all the time.

CORINNA CAMPBELL: With the different communities that I've worked with over the years, a lot of times, events where there would be a mask or a headdress or something involve some sort of social ritual, and the ones that I'm most familiar with involve the spiritual world.

AMY HOLZAPFEL: And the white, on the face, can sometimes refer to a spirit . . . and it makes me think a lot about these questions that we're coming up with of the performer's experience of a kind of transcendence, or the performer's experience of wearing it.

JAMES MANIGAULT-BRYANT: Do you know if it's usually worn by one person within a performance, or it's passed around, or . . .

AMY HOLZAPFEL: From the footage I've seen, it tends to be that one person is performing in that role, but I'm not sure what exactly this piece was referring to.

ROSEMARY KELANIC: I'm just sort of surprised by the ears. I don't have much more to say.

DUANE A. BAILEY: Well again, you wonder if there are certain things we don't understand about this piece of art because we're not there. And you kind of wonder if these characters are recognizable individuals. . . . Is it some particular event or is it some religious meaning that anybody would have understood who had seen this at the time? Really cool to think about.



ROSEMARY KELANIC: Yeah, I mean you kind of wonder are the figures just sort of generic? Are they just random people or do they have proper names, right?

AMY HOLZAPFEL: I think it's really interesting to think about this piece in the context of colonialism . . . even if it isn't intentional within the figures, there's

clearly this context that shapes how the reception would work.

CORINNA CAMPBELL: And also, just on the most basic level, that's a lot of people on your head! Okay? And it's heavy. So . . . I think the physical realities of the mask have a lot of implications in terms of community.

DOROTHEA LANGE

American, 1895–1965

Plantation owner, Mississippi Delta, near Clarksdale, Miss., June 1936

gelatin silver print

Museum purchase, Karl E. Weston Memorial Fund; 77.43.12

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SANDRA BURTON: Dorothea Lange documented so much of the history of our country during really perilous times—economically, politically and socially. . . . I’ve always admired the portraits that she’s dared to take of Americans. I would say in there, in our environment, there’s a truth about her photographs that always speaks to me across time and space.

KAREN MERRILL: Do you all know the Dorothea Lange *Migrant Mother*? I’m thinking about how there are parts of this that are both similar and really different.

MARGAUX COWDEN: I’m struck by how much space the plantation owner is filling up. He’s in front and really dominating the foreground, and . . . the man sitting in the very front row is so thin that it seems to . . . emphasize how their space is being really compressed.

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: I am absolutely in love with the composition decision of having a headless man leaning against the pole and then a body-less man emerging from the sort of seam of the car.

CATHERINE N. HOWE: I think the way that the photographer has done it using verticals really divides the photograph into four quadrants. And he takes up an entire one, and the four men are kind of confined to the exact same amount of space within the composition of the work.

JOE CRUZ: I feel like the black men in the image, they have a kind of defiance about them to me. . . . Seem to be in possession of something like their own wiry strength as they’re looking at the camera.

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: There’s a sort of pride in the masculine form that doesn’t have to splay its crotch open in this weird way, to spread its shoulders back. . . . I have to remark that there’s a sign that says “miss” right below his nuts.

SANDRA BURTON: This type of general store is a crossroads for the black and white population: a crossroad, a social center and place of commerce for this particular community.

MARGAUX COWDEN: There’s so much resonance that seems to actually just really ally the shape of the car with the man, and with his pants.

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: There’s a sort of presumed universal humanism between these fixtures, except that this plantation owner is allied also with this mechanical object, as though they both are some sort of product of industrialization.

KAREN MERRILL: Commercial object, the Coca-Cola too.



SANDRA BURTON: And dominant.

KAREN MERRILL: Yeah. In part because of his association and his attachment to the men.

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: It does seem exciting to think about this photograph as an index of a certain kind of incredibly forward-looking female ethnological gaze. . . . But there's something quite lovely about the time

period and thinking about just kind of amazing women going around and documenting American life.

CATHERINE N. HOWE: They know they're being photographed. So this is kind of a portrait of these men. The gentleman who's taking up so much space isn't even aware or is not acknowledging the woman who is taking the photograph either.

KÄTHE KOLLWITZ

German 1867–1945

Die Eltern (The Parents)
(plate 3 from the portfolio *Krieg (War)*),
1921–22, published 1923

woodcut

Gift of Andrew S. Keck, Class of 1924;
38.15

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DUANE A. BAILEY
COMPUTER SCIENCE

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AFRICANA STUDIES

ROSEMARY KELANIC: Whereas other countries have rebounded after the First World War, Germany was still not up to the standards of living it had before the First World War. It was a very gloomy period overall, and that's sort of what it makes me think of.

DAN LYNCH: Just that it's so dark is one thing, but also looking at the hands, and just the idea that you see the bones and it's almost a skeleton.

DUANE A. BAILEY: To me it seems like this is the loss of a child . . . the notion that this couple is now just one unit, which is what it means to be a couple, to be parents.

JOE CRUZ: It has a motion into something kind of dense in the center, like a black hole or like a whirlpool, like an abyss. I feel like the lines, they just move me.

ROSEMARY KELANIC: Both faces are obscured, and that reads to me as both a sign of anguish but also potentially shame. Like they blame themselves, or they feel guilt, perhaps, for whatever happened to the child.

AMY HOLZAPFEL: I guess I just see this edifice. Almost like a mountain, or . . .

DAN LYNCH: Rock?

AMY HOLZAPFEL: A rock, or there's a certain symmetry to it that's interesting. . . . And yet I'm also drawn to the violence of the absent space.

JOE CRUZ: The only sensation that I can have is of my own fingernails scratching those marks and how painful that would be.

JAMES MANIGAULT-BRYANT: I actually see the book *Beloved* for some reason. Which has little to do with twentieth-century Germany, but particularly, if these are the parents, and assuming this is the father, he's holding the mother, who, like Sethe in *Beloved* bears scars from her past.

AMY HOLZAPFEL: It feels like something that could have come out of an expressionist drama or expressionist performance of some kind, in that it feels like a tableau.

ROSEMARY KELANIC: Sort of what you were saying about a mountain, there's something rocky feeling about it and heavy.

DUANE A. BAILEY: This is the rock of this family. . . . It has that kind of symmetry, very, very strong, and we will overcome this, but it's going to require all of us.

AMY HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, absence of facial expressions is really interesting too. Just thinking about how we are denied the ability to read the emotion.



JOE CRUZ: I get that, but for me it's from the other direction, where that denial then makes it so that the only things I have to go with are these really macroscopic, global movements of body and that conjures a certain grief and anguish.

DAN LYNCH: They're skin and bone, and the clothes are hanging off them as if they're gaunt, and so on,

so it's almost like you don't need to see the faces to have some insight as to what they've been through and what's going on.

AMY HOLZAPFEL: I think that there's something intriguing about it being parents instead of the mother. . . . That the responsibility and the weight of grief falls on both parents as opposed to just the woman.

PIETER HUGO

South African, b. 1976

Abdullahi Mohammed with Mainasara, Lagos, Nigeria (from the series The Hyena and Other Men), 2007

digital C-Print

Museum purchase, Wachenheim Family and Art Fund; M.2008.24

© Pieter Hugo, Courtesy
Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

CORINNA CAMPBELL
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BIOLOGY

BILL WOOTTERS
PHYSICS



DAN LYNCH: It looks like some movie with post-apocalyptic, “Mad Max”-type influence. And yet, it’s not. It’s haunting.

MARGAUX COWDEN: Although the posture, the kind of body language of the man, initially could seem defensive, his face is not. It’s reflective, thoughtful. So yeah, the details really make a difference for me as well.

CATHERINE N. HOWE: He’s looking out at us. And I agree with you, it’s not a particularly confrontational gaze or anything. . . . And I’m wondering, “It’s such a desolate place. Who are these posters speaking to?”

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: At certain times of the day and on certain days of the month, this would be an absolutely bustling marketplace under informal pop-up type of shops.

CORINNA CAMPBELL: There’s an element of glamour, and it’s funny because if I try and sort of figure out what makes me think that, it’s bad-ass.

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: The video for “Girls Run the World” features Beyoncé and her backup dancers holding hyenas in this way. Troping on that kind of “Mad Max,” post-apocalyptic bad-assery, that kind of hybrid form that she plays with a lot in her videos.

MARGAUX COWDEN: The hyena looks like a pet in this photo to me. It doesn’t look at all like a fierce, wild animal, but instead looks like it’s kind of patiently waiting to see what happens next, which I think also really destabilizes the idea of the bad-assery.

BILL WOOTTERS: When I first looked at the picture on the computer screen, I thought, “That’s a kind of weird-looking dog.” And then I realized, “Oh. No, it’s not a dog.”

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: I’m wondering a lot about the politics, not just of the image but the white South-African photographer shooting in Nigeria a subject whose name is recognizably Muslim in Lagos, which is not a dominantly Muslim part of the country.

CORINNA CAMPBELL: I think one of the key issues here is mobility. I don’t get the impression that we’re looking at subjects that have very much mobility. Either one of them.

CATHERINE N. HOWE: The Hyena Men, this is their profession. And it is also something that is somewhat passed down from generation to generation, kind of like a family culture.

MARGAUX COWDEN: I think that this is sort of someone who has a nomadic or traveling life and yet, the impression of the photo is one of a lack of mobility or stasis.



BILL WOOTTERS: There is a lack of mobility, for sure. He grew up in this community, in this role, presumably.

CATHERINE N. HOWE: A lot of my students get really upset about the treatment of the animals themselves. . . . For me, it's really the relationship between the animal and the man that we see.

DAN LYNCH: It's this notion that this animal is very powerful and it's very dangerous and you've got to control it.

BILL WOOTTERS: It's interesting to think about what kind of relationship these two have with each other.

CATHERINE N. HOWE: They're dependent on each other.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

American, 1923–97

Rouen Cathedral, 1969

color screenprint

Museum purchase, Karl E. Weston Memorial
Fund; 72.20

© Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

DUANE A. BAILEY
COMPUTER SCIENCE

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DUANE A. BAILEY: As a computer scientist, you sit here and you think, is digitization going to destroy modern art? Here we see Roy Lichtenstein, who's probably primarily understood for his Pop Art, comic, Warhol-esque type things, and he is rather obviously harking back to this cathedral that Monet and many others have painted.

DAN LYNCH: When I first saw this print, I thought, Warhol meets Monet, and there is something about this . . . in terms of the size of the spots and how they're filled in, that it's like, if it were not an image that you were aware of, you may not even recognize it.

JOE CRUZ: We were all standing further back a moment ago and fusing it into something very familiar, but as you get closer, it threatens to become something unintelligible, but it, for me at least, never really resolves.

JAMES MANIGAULT-BRYANT: The opacity of the church image could reflect how church belief systems don't necessarily make sense in our contemporary moment.

ROSEMARY KELANIC: If you remove the polka dots, you can almost see the same image just with the red print. It's like an interference or like static . . . which is really very different from Monet's interpretation, which is so blended and based on colors.

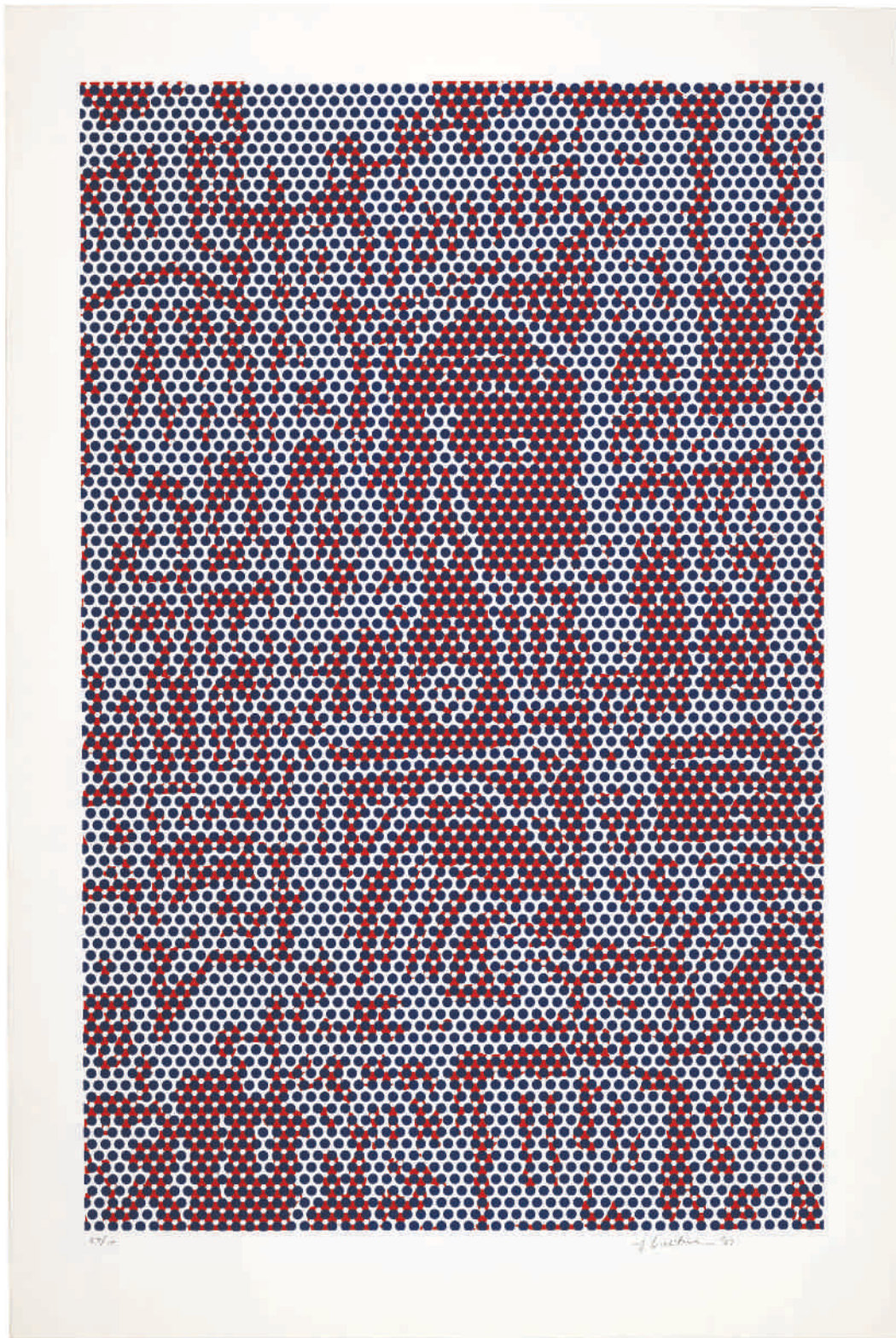
DUANE A. BAILEY: You walk up to it and you think, maybe this is a half-tone image. And then you realize, wait a minute, everything is exactly the same size . . . you're not only just filling in the image but you're actually providing the tonal qualities to it too.

AMY HOLZAPFEL: It's sort of telling us to do something, it's telling us to stand somewhere, and to understand it in a certain way that feels very affective and almost phenomenological or something. It's performing for us.

ROSEMARY KELANIC: It's almost like you're up too close on a TV and there's a sort of interference.

DAN LYNCH: Knowing nothing about how this was made, how would you do this? In the sense that you normally think of adding inks or adding paints onto the paper, whereas in this case, you would almost say, how much can I remove and keep the image?

JOE CRUZ: I like the idea that it's messing with us in some way, right, because I can envision myself walking into the gallery and having missed the spot from which I can interpret it, and walking by it and thinking, "Modern art. I could have done that." Right? Then sort of accidentally finding myself in a place where it resolves into, "OK. OK. There's actually something much deeper hidden in what seemed like a pile of dots."



AMY HOLZAPFEL: Maybe that's why I'm thinking of it being sort of a wink or a nod or a dance, is that it feels low-brow, too. . . . There's just an aspect of it playing with

that idea of the authentic art object, and reaching a much bigger audience somehow.

GEORGE INNESS

American, 1825–94

Twilight, ca. 1860

oil on canvas

Gift of Cyrus P. Smith, Class of 1918,
in memory of his father, B. Herbert Smith,
Class of 1885; 79.66

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MARGAUX COWDEN: I assigned an essay by this guy W. J. T. Mitchell and one of the things he says is, “Landscape is boring; we must not say so.” And every time I look at a landscape, that’s the first thing I think of.

BILL WOOTTERS: Oh, I don’t think it’s boring at all. For me, there’s this great . . . this deep mystery in there that’s somehow coming through the painting.

DAN LYNCH: I was going to say, maybe it’s because I’m boring. . . . I don’t know it’s just like I can look at one of these paintings for a long time and just sort of get lost in the details.

CORINNA CAMPBELL: If you think of when skies look like this, it’s maybe a couple of minutes. It’s very transitional.

BILL WOOTTERS: And he has to hold onto that vision.

CORINNA CAMPBELL: Which is just mind-blowing, being able to recreate that sort of feeling as well as all of these details.

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: This may be the humanist in me, but in thinking about the momentariness of that flash, right where light creates an entirely different world, both exterior but I’m also thinking interior with the window in the right side.

CATHERINE N. HOWE: I love that window too. . . . I was thinking not so much when you’re in there and the sun is shining in, but it’s actually kind of turning around and looking. It’s forcing you to look out.

BILL WOOTTERS: You can’t avoid it. There’s this beautiful scene and nature can be that way sometimes.

MARGAUX COWDEN: The thing that strikes me when I look at the window and the light hitting the window is how that deflection from the interior of the house builds on the total stillness of the water and the freezing of the sunset to create this atmosphere that is just preternaturally calm and totally still and in that sense, incredibly superficial.

CATHERINE N. HOWE: Did you say what year? About 1860?

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: Please no one follow me down this path of banality, but . . .

BILL WOOTTERS: It’s just before the Civil War . . .

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: The Civil War. Way more banal. . . . I’m thinking in some way about the common experience that doesn’t take place in paint anymore. It takes place on Instagram, right? So how would we hashtag this painting? Like #fluorescentboredom or some kind of like #blazeofstillness.



CATHERINE N. HOWE: One of the things I like about this is a kind of idealized vision of how humans can inhabit the landscape.

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: Well, in thinking about the biographical detail of Inness being an abolitionist, I'm also . . . wondering about . . . how often the land and the natural were drawn on as sort of resources for developing an ethics, especially in the mid-to-late-19th century.

CORINNA CAMPBELL: Landscape and a transitional style.

MARGAUX COWDEN: And sometimes for undermining and disguising an ethics without appearing to do so. I see landscape used a lot in that as well.

ANJULI RAZA KOLB: It's just a landscape. No abolition here.



**WILLIAMS
COLLEGE
MUSEUM
OF ART**

SEPTEMBER 11, 2015 THROUGH JANUARY 3, 2016

Williams College Museum of Art
15 Lawrence Hall Drive, Suite 2, Williamstown, MA 01267