

## *Sky High*

When a pedestrian crosses the street using a smart phone, or a driver is texting, one is tempted to yell out: “Look up, you might be missing something.” This admonition can be applied to many other aspects of our technology-obsessed culture. It can also offer a unique lens through which to view an often-overlooked area of contemporary art. Why not have an exhibition that showcases contemporary Ohio artists who have “looked up?” At first glance, this theme appears a bit amorphous. But when artists from across the state were presented with it, some very unique work appeared. Artists do this—they focus on some aspect of the world that was on everyone’s mind all along, even though most of us did not realize it. They personify what the term *avant garde* really means—they truly are “out in front.” We just need to catch up with them.

This exhibition began with the concept of “sky high.” It is not a landscape show despite the fact that Ohio is blessed with many talented landscape painters who masterfully include elements of the sky in their work. In this exhibition, the sky *is* the subject. Artists showed us that our scope, in addition to the concept of “sky,” should include clouds, storms and tornadoes, as well as the planets of our solar system and the stars in our galaxy.

The sky, *per se*, is a relatively recent subject in the history of Western art. In fact, it was not depicted in a notable way until the Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci was the first to incorporate landscape and its corollary, the sky, in his work and even then, it was used as a secondary element. For example, the sky, shown through a window, frames the head of Christ in his *Last Supper* and serves as the background in the *Mona Lisa*. Da Vinci also used atmospheric light for his formulation of *chiaroscuro*, the rendition of tonal values that emphasizes the contours and depth of a form, such as the human body, as it exists in space.

After the Renaissance, the sky and the atmosphere would continue to make an appearance in notable works of art. Dutch painters in the 1600s incorporated large and dramatic sky vistas into their landscapes. However, it was not until the 1820s that the English painter John Constable, known for his landscapes, created a series of cloud paintings without landscape references. Constable’s fellow countryman, the Romantic painter J.M.W. Turner, emphasized

the atmosphere, especially storms, to such an extent that he became known as “the painter of light.” Vincent Van Gogh, in his 1889 *Starry Night*, emphasized the night sky and enlarged its bright, pulsating stars. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Alfred Stieglitz used the emerging artistic medium of photography to capture sky and clouds in his *Music* and *Equivalents* series of the 1920s.

Many of the works of the artists in this exhibition produced by the Riffe Gallery are direct descendants of both Constable and Stieglitz. Edward Charney and David LaPalombara use oil to capture the essence of clouds. Diane Stemper utilizes drawing and weather map collage elements to articulate global climate connections. The team of Diana Duncan Holmes and Wendy Sorin combines photography with such nontraditional media as fiber and text to depict the movement of the atmosphere. Joel Whitaker and Jessica Larva use photography to find elegant unity in sky patterns, while Sean Wilkinson examines the mechanical reproduction of sky photographs from a novel perspective. The kinetic energy of digital animation, chosen by Tess Cortés (Neta Bitts) and Kate Shannon, captures the dynamism of the atmosphere over time.

Other artists follow more in Turner’s path. Judy Brandon’s monumental landscape shows nature as an overwhelming force, as it often was often seen by the Romantics. Even though he does not use a painting medium, Rod Bouc’s large drawings capture the emotional impact and power of storms. Storms, in the shape of tornadoes, also dominate the work of Susan Danko and Julie Friedman, who create unique sculptures from that most fragile medium, paper.

Deeper space and futuristic frontiers beyond the earth’s atmosphere are some of the subjects touched upon by Rosemary Bloch and Danielle Rante. Bloch floats imaginary, colorful planets on the gallery walls while Rante, using photographic techniques, captures the view of the night sky taken from a specific place and time. In contrast, Robert Coates takes the viewer back to the past with his mythically-inspired forms and other sculptures based on elements of folk art.

In recent years, Ohioans have experienced unique and extreme weather events in the form of floods, tornadoes, derechos and the polar vortex. Questions about their possible role as evidence of ongoing climate change are a major scientific, social, and political concern. As artists are often harbingers and foretellers, it is not surprising that many of the works in the

exhibition also subtly raise these questions, including those by Judy Brandon, Rod Bouc, Susan Danko, Judy Friedman, and Diane Stemper.

Constable wrote about the centrality of the sky in this way: “The sky is ‘the source of light’ in nature—and governs everything.” All of the Ohio artists in this exhibition, through their imaginative use of subject and media, give visual testament to Constable’s words. We all benefit because Ohio’s artists, rooted in past artistic breakthroughs, continue to “look up” and let us know what is coming.

Kay Koeninger, Professor of Art

Sinclair Community College

Dayton, OH