



Cutting Edge Art Interprets the Past in an Unusual Exhibition

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by Pat Rogers

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It's not often that historical society exhibitions can be described as edgy. Yet this is the description that fits a new exhibition set to open at the Suffolk County Historical Society (SCHS). The "edge" isn't found in the concept but in the selections of artists and the dialogues they are bound to raise in a exhibition that presents art as a way to reconsider history.

"Back to the Future: Contemporary Artists Consider the Permanent Collection" was born after an unexpected move by SCHS to team up with [CarriageHouse Arts](#), a non-profit organization that supports the development of experimental cutting edge contemporary art. CarriageHouse Arts is headed by Mary Lou Cohalan, a former long-time director of the Islip Art Museum. Under her helm, the museum was known for presenting contemporary art exhibition that couldn't be found elsewhere on Long Island. Several years ago, Cohalan switched positions and become director of CarriageHouse Arts, which shares a campus with the Islip Art Museum.

Up until 2012, CarriageHouse Arts presented the opportunity for new works to be made during residency-type programs. Installations, large-scale works and artmaking that allowed artist to push into new directions or (explore the depths of a continuing one) was a hallmark of CarriageHouse Arts.

From the East End, artists awarded spots in the program include Junko Sugimoto, who recently created a site-specific installation made of paper and fishing line at the Mulford Farm as part of [The Moby Project](#). Other East End artists participating in the CarriageHouse Arts program includes [Monica Banks](#), Clayton Orehek, [Christine Sciulli](#) and [Ted Victoria](#).

CarriageHouse Arts now provides grants, instead of workspace opportunities, but retains the same mission, according to its website.

For "Back to the Future: Contemporary Artists Consider the Permanent Collection", Cohalan put on her curator's hat and selected 11 artists whose work evokes a dialogue with an object held in SCHS's permanent collection. Some artists in the exhibition have been part of CarriageHouse Arts program or involved with the Islip Art Museum and others have not.



“Souper Dress” by Andy Warhol. Courtesy Suffolk County Historical Society.

The “Back to the Future” line-up includes Andy Warhol, Karen Shaw, Cara Barer, Katherine Frey, collaborations by Judith Richardson and Keith Long, Judith Condon, Donna Sharrett, Elizabeth Duffy, Susan Hoeltzel and Rob Carter. Works include installation, video, sculptural ceramics, photography and mixed media works.

All of the contemporary art is installed nearby the historical object that inspired a cross-century dialogue. One exhibition highlight is the Warhol – mourning dress connection.

In the sixties, Warhol made his “Souper Dress” for the Campbell Soup Company. His paper dress is decorated with a pattern of Campbell soup cans imprints. Warhol believed the future would see people wearing paper clothing so they could be easily discarded after use, according to the museum.

His dress is exhibit besides an elaborate 19th century mourning outfit that is handmade and meant to be passed on for generations, according to the museum. Evidence of the labor-intensive process to create the outfit includes details found in an intricate lace skirt, brocade jacket and gauze blouse.



19th Century mourning outfit. Part of the collection held by the Suffolk County Historical Society. Image courtesy of SCHS.

“When considered side-by-side, the two dresses are a literal ‘fashion statement’, a vivid illustration of the way modern consumer culture and mass production has replaced notions of continuity and permanence,” writes Cohalan of the pairing.

Other pairings may prove just as interesting. Karen Shaw is presenting a large installation based on based on maps that explore “...the arbitrary nature of boundaries, and the way man-made definitions of nations and states—such as those in India and Pakistan, Israel and Palestine—are often capricious,” according to an exhibition description.

The installation is paired with historic maps from the SCHS collection that echo similar themes. They include the ways Native American holdings in Suffolk County (and elsewhere) were folded into the defined towns and hamlets now known collectively as Long Island.

Cara Barer’s photographs of books are juxtaposed with archives from the SCHS collection that are poised to be e digitalized. This conjures the question of the fate of historic books and records as physical objects, suggested the museum.

Rob Carter's video, *Metropolis*, captures "a sweep of history" in Charlotte, NC, which is considered America's fastest growing city, according to SCHS. Central to the video are paper pop-up animations that illustrate the relentless cycle of building, destruction, and rebuilding that characterizes the life of modern towns and cities. The bridge to Suffolk County and the East End, with its development and land use debates, isn't a far trip to travel.

The exhibition also features sculptures made from furniture parts by Judith Richardson and Keith Long that echo the formal elements in the SCHS furniture collection and ceramic busts of ordinary people by Judith Condon. These were created in response to the heroic aesthetic defining the 19th Century marble busts of Long Island industrialists.

Mandalas by Donna Sharrett made of human hair and memorabilia echo historic funeral hair wreaths. Decorated plastic plates by Katherine Frey provides a modern-day contrast to fine heirloom china held in the museum's historic collection.

Collages of birds of prey by Elizabeth Duffy give a contemporary take on SCHS's taxidermy collection of wildlife. Susan Hoeltzel's art installation draws inspiration from the collection's holdings of farm implements.

Ultimately, the exhibition organizers hope by pairing contemporary art that can challenge the past may be a way to promote interest in local history and demonstrate that history doesn't have to remain in the past.

"We hope the exhibit will show that history is not static, something relegated to the past- but something that is alive as an influence in the present and a key to the future," said Cohalan.

The museum believes the exhibition will show that inspiration can run both ways.

"Riverhead is an art mecca and a gateway to the East End," stated Kathryn Curran, Director of the Suffolk County Historical Society, in an exhibition release. "Through *Back to the Future*, we hope to show the way history influences contemporary culture."

BASIC FACTS: "Back to the Future: Contemporary Artists Consider the Permanent Collection" has an Opening Reception on Friday (Oct. 18) from 6 to 8 p.m. The exhibition continues through Nov. 23, 2013 at the Suffolk County Historical Society. The contemporary art exhibition is presented in the gallery rooms of the SCHS along with the artifacts that inspired the work or its selection. There are approximately 22,000 objects in the SCHS's collection.

Suffolk County Historical Society is located at 800 West Main St., Riverhead, NY 11901. www.suffolkcountyhistoricalociety.org.

The museum is open Wednesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.