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Review of 'Heirlooms' show at the Racine Art Museum

By Diane Bacha, Art City contributor

Sept. 9, 2013 8:30 a.m.

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When I was a child I thought you had to be wealthy to give or receive heirlooms – a silver tea service, a portrait of a bearded ancestor, a cameo brooch. I didn't grow up around any of those things, so there was always a mystique surrounding the idea of Passing Things Down.

It's an idea that life disabused me of, but I hadn't put much thought into why until seeing "Twenty-First Century Heirlooms" at the Racine Art Museum. I love the way this show has since wormed its way into my thinking about values and valuables, and also about what we choose to do with the things we inherit.

Lena Vigna, RAM's curator of exhibitions, has assembled works from 26 artists in

many kinds of media. At first glance, some of the pieces feel like a straightforward exercise in re-interpreting something traditional. But the best of them sneak up on you with inferences. Two examples are emiko oye's and Ashley Buchanan's interpretations of ornate jewelry -- the kind, as a child, I might imagine inheriting from a wealthy dowager great-aunt if I had one. When oye works LEGO pieces into her necklaces and Buchanan distills strands of jewels into silhouettes of the real things, they get me thinking about changing definitions of femininity and craftsmanship, and they underscore the enduring power of jewelry to suggest privilege and aspiration.

I found myself thinking a lot about privilege as I viewed this show. Beth Lipman's fragile blown-glass still life speaks to the genteel class, Stacey Lee Webber's tools forged from coins speak to the working class – the first fragile and decorative, the second sturdy and practical. One passes down what one can, and without being sure it will endure.

"How the past influences the present comes up with me all the time," Vigna told me in a phone interview. As she chose items for this show she was aware that there were many different entry points – jewelry, jugs, bowls, clothing, paper, vessels, glass, even money – but it all boiled down to a personal response to something in the past. One person's "heirloom" might be another's Goodwill Store donation but, Vigna pointed out, there's value in wondering about the disconnect.

Several artists re-assemble or re-think actual objects from the past, such as Donna Sharrett's collages pieced together from items belonging to a deceased brother and Mary Smull's unfinished needlepoints. The first is a touching, talisman-like tribute to a loved one, the second a small but tragic reminder of good intentions gone astray.

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Others use very old techniques and forms to say something very here-and-now – a personal favorite in this camp is "2nd Amendment Squirrel," by an artist who's expert in reproducing 17th- and 18th-century ceramics. Michelle Erickson's squirrel-shaped flask could almost come straight from a museum display case, except that it's toting a machine gun.

"Twenty-First Century Heirlooms" is filled with well-executed items by skilled artists and artisans, many of them lovely and some of them provocative. It is also a bit like a haunted house -- full of ghosts from the past and associations that can jump out of dark corners. My favorite artists in this show worked in those dark corners, coming to terms with something the past had either given or taken, unbidden. They couldn't control what was handed down to them, but they could control what they did with it.

That's ultimately a reassurance. As Vigna put it: "The past isn't a weight. It's a resource."

"Twenty-First Century Heirlooms" is on view until Sept.15. The Racine Art Museum is at 441 Main St., Racine. It's open daily and admission is \$5 for adults. See [our photo gallery of images from the show](#). For more information visit www.RAM.org.

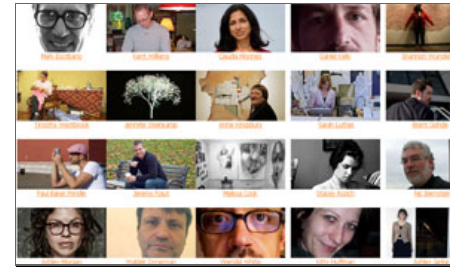
Diane Bacha is a publisher at Kalmbach Publishing and a regular Art City contributor. Image: Art City contributors Diane Bacha and Jessica Z Schafer, a marketing specialist at the Racine Art Museum, look at the exhibit. Photo by Mary Louise Schumacher.

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