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JON SARKIN

# ART NEW ENGLAND

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE



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ON THE COVER: 330 ml beer cans, Mikkeller, San Diego, CA/ Copenhagen, DK. Art direction and design by artist Keith Shore (Art Institute of Boston graduate, 2002), whose next exhibition of beer label artwork will be shown at Oxbow Brewery, Portland, ME, in August. Mikkeller and Oxbow will release a collaborative beer the night of the opening. Digital photo: Outshinery.com. See page 22.

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**PHANTOM PUNCH: CONTEMPORARY ART FROM SAUDI ARABIA IN LEWISTON**

Bates College Museum of Art • Lewiston, ME • [bates.edu/museum](http://bates.edu/museum) • Through March 18, 2017

When we read about Saudi Arabia these days, rarely does the story relate to artists, and yet, on the evidence of this exhibition, the country boasts a lively and provocative art scene. Curated by Loring M. Danforth, Charles A. Dana Professor of Anthropology at Bates College, and Dan Mills, the Museum of Art's director, the show features the work of 16 "leading and emerging" Saudi artists working in a range of mediums.

Many of the pieces have a political/cultural edge. In Sarah Abu Abdallah's video *Saudi Automobile* (2012), for example, the artist, wearing an abaya, paints a small dilapidated car a light pink. This act, which she likens to "icing a cake," is a "wishful gesture... cold comfort for the current impossibility of my dream that I, as an independent person, can drive myself to work one day." A native of Qatif, Abdallah is pursuing a master's degree in digital media at the Rhode Island School of Design.



Sarah Abu Abdallah, *Saudi Automobile*, 2012, video still. Courtesy of the artist.

Nasser Al-Salem, born in Mecca, has explored traditional calligraphy, but also modern symbols such as the bar code, which appears in the wooden installation *He Likes Not Those Who Commit Excess* (*Surat A'raf:31*) (2012). The title, from the Holy Quran, adds a religious subtext to this universal image of consumption.

The Bates show is one of four group shows in

the U.S. this year focusing on contemporary Saudi art. It is part of CULTURUNNERS—"an international platform...support[ing] a group of Saudi artists as they embark on a multi-city tour...to generate people-to-people dialogue...." A number of the featured artists have also participated in exhibitions hosted by Edge of Arabia, a nonprofit started in 2003 that seeks to connect the Middle East and western world by way of art exchanges.

The organizers of the show at Bates expect their exhibition to be a "cultural phantom punch" to an audience largely unaware of the art of this Western Asian nation—a somewhat over-stated ambition considering what seems like familiar work in the show. That said, kudos to the museum for raising awareness of artists who are working in synch with global aesthetics yet bringing their own expressive and sometimes humorous Saudi take to the artistic act.

—Carl Little

**JULIET KARELSEN: GROUNDLESS**

Speedwell Projects • Portland, ME • [facebook.com/speedwellprojects](http://facebook.com/speedwellprojects) • Through January 15, 2017

Over the years, the New York City-born, Maine-based artist Juliet Karelson has drawn inspiration from eclectic sources, from Jerry Garcia and Magritte to the flora and fauna of Costa Rica. Karelson has also painted unsettling self-portraits and cosmological fantasies. Her mediums include oil, gouache and various fibers.

This exhibition, among the first in a new space located in Portland's East End, features a number of works prompted by emptying her father's New York apartment after his death in 2014. In one grouping, Karelson renders tchotchkes found there. These figurines—a girl with grapes, a puppy—are rescued from mawkishness by a delicate use of gouache.

In crayon rubbings of gloves worn by her grandmother Oma (25 pairs were found in a closet), the apparitional evening wear has as much resonance as Irving Penn's beat-up gloves. More pointed are six-inch-diameter embroidered representations of white-capped plastic pill containers.

The colorful hoop samplers lend what the artist calls an "ironic reverence" to these ubiquitous bottles.

A different kind of irony is found in Karelson's gouache portraits of her father and the family members and hospice and home health aides who took care of him in his final months. The *Sympathy* series plays on greeting cards, in size—5 by 7 inches—and in palette, the background of each a warm pink. Yet these simple likenesses are genuine tributes—and memorable, especially the images of Mr. Karelson as he faces death.

The *Lichen* series came out of a stitching workshop taught by Rachel Meginnis at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in 2015. While in residence Karelson became fascinated by elements of nature in the woods and began riffing on them using embroidery floss on linen. These horizontal miniatures, each one no bigger than a pack of cards, resemble landscapes; some



Juliet Karelson, *Lichens*, 2016, embroidery floss on linen, 2½ x 4".

might be tiny Abstract Expressionist compositions. A group of them was shown at the Maine Jewish Museum

in Portland this past summer.

Karelson received an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Since moving to Maine in 1991, she has shown her work across the northeast. This exhibition reconfirms the artist's engaging take on the world, at once personal and peculiar.

[An expanded version of this show will be mounted at the University of Maine at Farmington Art Gallery, February 3–March 12, 2017.]

—Carl Little