

On exhibit: 'Double Consciousness' explores race, gender, class

"Double Consciousness" exhibit looks at race, gender, class

By Amy Griffin

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Installation view of "2x2 Collective: double consciousness" The Arts Center of the Capital Region, 265 River St., Troy Through Dec. 21, 2013 ()

Troy

[W.E.B. Dubois](#) wrote of a "double consciousness" among African-Americans. He described it as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." For the artists showing in the exhibit "2x2 Collective: Double Consciousness" at the [Arts Center of the Capital Region](#), this sensation can be extended to include not just race but class, gender and sexuality, as well. The work in this show explores identity — how we see each other and ourselves.

The 2x2 Collective in the title is made up of three of the four featured artists: [Ben Altman](#), [Maria Driscoll McMahon](#) and [Sandra Stephens](#). The fourth artist, [Carla Rae Johnson](#), is a guest to the collective. Altman, Driscoll McMahon and Stephens all met in the [New York Foundation for the Arts'](#) MARK program, a professional development program for artists living outside New York

City. Originally a four-member group, artist [Christine Heller](#) eventually dropped out but was instrumental in the conception of both the collective and the show, according to Stephens. Rather than replacing Heller, they decided to bring in guest artists.

Like the other artists, Johnson also was associated with NYFA, having been awarded a NYFA Artist's Fellowship in 2005. In an email exchange with the four artists, all agreed that Johnson was a perfect fit.

As is other collectives, working together doesn't necessarily mean collaborating, although there are two collaborative pieces on view in the Arts Center show. It's more about supporting each other. "We pool our strengths in other ways. The work of an artist extends far beyond making art," writes Altman. They share in the necessary, but not very romantic, business side of art, from searching for funding and other opportunities to writing and editing statements and proposals.

Although they met doing those sorts of things individually in the NYFA MARK program, it was their shared sensibilities that drew them together. Each in different ways deals with issues around identity and the figure.

In "Double Consciousness," the work of each artist is distinct and yet they play well off each other. Ithaca-based Ben Altman's self-portrait photos as a tortured prisoner in a basement are strung up and suspended with wire at the four corners. Perhaps he's commenting on the stereotype of the tortured artist or on the larger issue of the American practice of torturing foreign prisoners. Whatever his ultimate message, the titles, "White Flight #1/White Flight #2 (This is Not the Airplane Position)" and "Portrait of the Artist as a White Man," suggest his critique begins with an acknowledgement of the privileged position he's in as a white male.

Johnson, of Peekskill, has her own series of self-portraits as something "other." In her series of drawings entitled "Portrait of the Artist as an Arrogant American," Johnson critiques American excess in "Have-to-Mouth" and delves into the marriage equality debate in "Sanctity." Her impressively crafted sculptures in "The [Seance Series](#)" bring together two famous figures she admires, one male, one female. "[Emily Dickinson Meets Marcel Duchamp](#)" represents the two playing a game of chess in which Dickinson's only piece is a revolver tucked in drawer.

The stereotypes that Driscoll-McMahon, of Lockwood, Tioga County, confront could be seen as related to class. Her video from a project called "This Mad Attachment: The Burdocks Project" explores the term "redneck" as she interviews people from Tioga County. More than class, though, she's interested in geographic stereotypes that marginalize rural people. According to her website, this project, which included video, performance and sculpture, used the burdock weed for its diamond-in-the-rough quality. Known for its annoying burrs, the weed is also used in herbal medicine to treat multiple ailments. Driscoll-McMahon walked around town in a suit made of burdock, transforming herself in a kind of "untouchable."

Sandra Stephens, of New Hartford, Oneida County, presents close-ups of skin, some of which morph from one shade to another in one photo. Her video installation, "Purity, Sanctity and Corporeality" was also included in the 2011 Mohawk Hudson Regional. In it, she confronts notions of race as they relate to depictions of purity in Christianity. A single actor plays the part of Jesus and Mary as each character's hair and skin color changes every few seconds.

Religion, race, class, gender and sexuality are complicated and multifaceted issues. That fact doesn't deter the artists of "Double Consciousness," who admirably attempt to start a dialogue about how we construct identities for ourselves and others.

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"2x2 Collective: Double Consciousness"

Where: The Arts Center of the Capital Region, 265 River St., Troy.