Hallie Ford Fellows explore ‘What Needs to Be Said’
The Salem museum features 13 artists in a traveling exhibit emphasizing the range of visual art

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The poster for What Needs to Be Said, an exhibition at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art in Salem, features an image of a stack five thick hardbound volumes by artist MK Guth, who incorporates participatory engagement into work that includes printmaking.

These books, bearing the title of the show, are in fact part of the show. Each has a subtitle: Love, Politics, Identity, Ecology, and Art. When the exhibit opened mid-September, most of what must be thousands of pages were blank, but that’s for the viewer to rectify. Those with something to say, something they deem must be said, may say it here (anonymously or not) and know that they've contributed to Guth’s vision. She will seal the volumes once they are filled, making them, according to guest curator Diana Nawi, “repositories for inner thoughts, objects that index and contain critical expression without fully revealing it — an apt metaphor for the possibilities of artistic practice.”
Guth is one of 13 artists whose artistic practice is featured in the show, which runs through Dec. 20 on the Willamette University campus, a few blocks east of downtown. What links them? All were recipients of the Hallie Ford Fellowship between 2014 and 2016, an award that goes to Oregon artists “based on accomplishment, depth of practice, and future potential.”

A variety of work fills the sprawling ground-floor Melvin Henderson-Rubio Gallery: photography, drawings, installation, sculpture, a soundscape (which I initially thought was the building’s air circulation system), as well as the public engagement invited by Guth’s books. A handsome, 112-page hardcover catalog with short essays by Nawi and a half-dozen arts-and-culture critics can be purchased in the lobby.

What Needs to Be Said is touring Oregon. It opened in the Umpqua Valley Arts Center and Umpqua Community College in Roseburg earlier this year. Early in 2020, it arrives at Disjecta in Portland. The show heads south again in 2021 to the Schneider Museum of Art at Southern Oregon University in Ashland.
The diversity of media on display posed, for me, a chicken-egg question. Was the show’s title selected and Guth’s piece adopted it? Or was the piece submitted before the show was named? I asked Nawi, a Los Angeles-based curator. It turns out the book stacks came first; Nawi was already familiar with them.

“MK’s books were already on the checklist when I decided to use their title as the overall title for the show,” she said. “The show came together based around each individual artist’s practice and strengths, and specific works and projects they were making or had recently completed.”

Participating artists, she said, were not given any guidelines of what to submit. “There was no directive, overarching conceptual theme to the show,” she added. “I think it is more generally a show that evidences the range of ways these artists work and puts an emphasis on the idea of artistic practice.” The program notes expound on this: “There is no single theme that unifies [the artists’] diverse practices, but rather, seen together, they illuminate the breadth of approaches that define our globalized art world.”


Time and space prohibit a comprehensive, piece-by-piece review here. I was there opening day and have read some, but not all, of the essays, and haven’t had a chance to return. But What Needs to Be Said is, at least in one sense, like any other show: Visitors who spend an hour or so taking it all in will find that some pieces have more to say to them than others.

In some cases, it is considerably easier to discern what the artist wanted to “say” than others. Wendy Red Star’s use of historical images that she
brilliantly annotates in a diptych is striking in this regard.

Red Star, who grew up on the Apsáalooke (Crow) reservation in Montana and now lives and works in Portland, uses her art to “explore the intersections of Native American ideologies and colonialist structures, both historically and in contemporary society,” according to her biography. It is an essential and ongoing exercise, a reminder that all the social and political waves that buffet us daily are only ripples in the more powerful tide of history.

Each image in the series is an indigenous portrait. Originally made to document the 19th-century visit by an Apsáalooke delegation to Washington, the images were later slapped onto the labels for Honest Tea.

In an article on the work in the catalog, Nicole Smythe-Johnson takes up the story:
“Initially, Red Star found the images comforting reminders of home. But she soon began to wonder how the non-indigenous people around her received them. Did the corporations mobilizing these images, or their audiences, understand the images’ significance? Or was it just another representation of a static, exotic, homogenous ‘Native American culture’?”

Red Star’s response is the diptych in *What Needs to Be Said*. The images are annotated in red ink. A few speech bubbles are thrown in. It’s a profound and occasionally witty way of reclaiming the iconography — not just from Honest Tea, but from the larger culture of imperialism.
At the far end of the exhibit, Ben Buswell’s sprawling photo-sculpture, *All at Once*, is captivating, pleasing both from a distance and up close. It occupies the same physical space as the contraption devised by “sculptor of sound” Jack Ryan. The device modifies the Schumann resonances, an invisible phenomena we are all immersed in but oblivious of: the frequency of the Earth’s electromagnetic field. Using objects such as a seashell and a coffee maker, Ryan makes that frequency audible as a faint but discernable drone. It’s a perfect and calming soundscape in which to view the rest of the show.

Tannaz Farsi lays Iranian history bare in her multi-part wall installation, *Strata of Empire*. The accompanying catalog essay by Smythe-Johnson notes that the work’s “primary concern ... is the way in which the day-to-day objects of our own lives can become artifacts that speak to much broader narratives.” The most poignant example is a photograph of a Persepolis ruin wrapped in the shirt her mother wore when they left Iran for the United States.

The most spectacular piece is arguably *Cadre*, by Storm Tharp. Filling virtually an entire wall in the room with the highest ceiling are 36 images on paper in a grid, most of them portraits filled in with panels of color splashes. Knowing of Tharp’s interest in masks (which, by the way, will be the subject of multiple exhibits next month at the Chehalem Cultural Center in Newberg) helps explain his
approach, in which various moods are conveyed by distortion. According to the catalog essay by Charlie Tatum, “the works come across as an unlikely mix of Cubism and Color Field painting.”

The collection of drawings by Tom Prochaska is fascinating and merits close study. Prochaska is known for painting and printmaking, but *What Needs to Be Said* features a collection of his drawings, which come across as visual tone poems. Landscapes, portraits, and even a few sexual encounters are among the subjects. One, *Usual Saint*, depicts a man riddled with arrows. It’s a mix of unknowable stories and mysterious visions, rendered with a light touch. They look less like “finished” drawings than they do skeletal snapshots of an artist’s thought processes. There’s enough in the show that virtually anyone who visits *What Needs to Be Said* will find something that speaks to them. And even if there’s not, you can always visit the tables with Guth’s books, open to a blank page, and get to work.

*What Needs to Be Said: Hallie Ford Fellows in the Visual Arts continues through Dec. 20 in the Hallie Ford Museum of Art on the Willamette University campus, 700 State St., Salem. General admission is $6; adults 55 and older, $4; children and students through 17, free; students 18+ with ID, $3. Museum docents will give gallery talks Nov. 5, 12, 19, 26, and Dec. 3, 10 and 17. For more information, call 503-370-6855 or visit the website.*