Hirshhorn Presents “Peter Coffin: Here & There”

Diverse Works Installed Throughout Museum and on Plaza

Demonstrate Artist’s Inventiveness and Wit

Nature, science, pseudoscience, psychological displacement, urban happenstance and what-if brainstorms are among the myriad departure points for the works of Peter Coffin (American, b. Berkeley, Calif., 1972; lives and works in New York). On view at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum June 29 through Oct. 6, “Peter Coffin: Here & There” presents a range of work in diverse media—sculpture, single-channel video, photography, lithography and video installation—throughout the building, on the plaza and online.

Shunning a signature style in favor of an uninhibited approach, the artist draws on experimentation and insight. “Play is not ordinary life,” said Coffin. “[This] does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with seriousness, with an absorption and a devotion. The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid.” To highlight the engagement of Coffin’s work with various spaces throughout the Hirshhorn, the exhibition brochure uses photographic details and verbal clues to guide visitors toward the locations where it is sited.

Among the highlights of this selective solo exhibition is the debut of a museum commission, located on the lower level. For “Untitled (Smithsonian Hirshhorn Museum),” 2013, Coffin devised a temporary installation of paintings from the permanent collection, including works by Pablo Picasso, Edward Hopper, Willem de Kooning and John Singer Sargent, and created an animation to be superimposed over these works. Comprising samples of “found” imagery, sound and music, the animation cycles on and off; during the intervals when Coffin’s intervention subsides, viewers reexamine the paintings with heightened intensity. The artist has created comparable projects at the Tate and again with works from the Pompidou Center. At the Hirshhorn, Coffin’s work places
emphasis on the museum’s permanent collection, which is being featured in a series of exhibitions leading up to the museum’s 40th anniversary in 2014.

Combining a helix and a torus, “Untitled (Spiral Staircase),” 2007, located on the plaza, joins mathematical shapes familiar from biology and cosmology into a mind-bending sculptural puzzle. By looping back on itself, the spiral staircase creates an endless path that can be traversed only in the imagination. For “Untitled (Rainbow),” 2007, located on the lower level, Coffin constructed a collage in the form of an actual spiral—which coils outward from a fixed center—by linking the arcs of rainbows depicted in a series of 31 snapshot-like photographs.

For “Untitled,” 2012, the artist depicts an array of fruit in a frame-shaped arrangement such that the frame becomes an image itself. Coffin adds a conceptual spin to Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s 16th-century portraits composed of fruits and vegetables. This work exists as a C-print but for this exhibition the image appears briefly in the artist’s animated work and can also be found on the Hirshhorn’s website, hirshhorn.si.edu.

Evoking a blissed-out psychedelic spectrum, the brilliant hues of “Untitled (Designs for Colby Poster Company),” 2007, glow throughout a series of 80 lithographs encircling the entire third-floor escalator lobby. Printed by a firm whose wares once advertised concerts and county fairs, these signs bear no message. They are instead luminous, Rothko-esque abstractions. In 2008, the Hirshhorn acquired a selection of works from this series.

The exhibition includes two takes on the animal kingdom. Coffin’s absurdist humor and fascination with manipulations of scale come together in “Untitled (Dog),” 2012. On the lower level, this mixed-media Great Dane is rendered larger than life and made to float slightly off the floor. Sporting piercing blue eyes, it seems to be immersed in thought. Tucked near the third-floor elevator, “Untitled (One Minute Whale Breach),” 2005, turns a spectacular, if common, natural phenomenon on its head. The camera rotates in the direction of the whale’s leap, causing the horizon line on the monitor to move clockwise relative to the counterclockwise motion of the giant beast.

To take in this exhibition, visitors are encouraged to traverse the museum, discovering evidence of the artist’s chameleon-like virtuosity embedded among works by others. Coffin’s medium, means and stylistic approach may shift, but one constant is his exuberant subversiveness, which is often found in tandem with wry, cosmic humor.

“Peter Coffin: Here & There” is organized by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. The exhibition’s curator is Hirshhorn associate curator Kelly Gordon. “Peter Coffin: Here & There” is made possible in part by Altria Group.
Related Programs

The Hirshhorn offers a range of interactive educational experiences designed to engage people of all interest levels in contemporary art. For the first time, the museum is presenting a public opening. This free event takes place on Friday, June 28, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. Titled Summer Preview, this will be the first opportunity for the public to view “Peter Coffin: Here & There.” During this event only, an additional work by Coffin receives its world premiere: “Untitled (Flying Fruit),” 2013, will screen continuously throughout the evening in the Ring Auditorium. The Hirshhorn’s other exhibitions, “Directions: Jennie C. Jones: Higher Resonance,” “Over, Under, Next: Experiments in Mixed Media, 1913–Present” and “Black Box: DEMOCRACIA,” will also be open. Both Coffin and Jones will be in attendance. Food and drinks will be available for purchase on the Plaza.

Artists and other experts address works on view in a regular series of Friday Gallery Talks; consult hirshhorn.si.edu for a complete schedule. Also available on the website is the museum’s archive of podcasts, which makes gallery walk-throughs and interviews with artists accessible internationally.

About the Hirshhorn

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Smithsonian Institution’s museum of international modern and contemporary art, has nearly 12,000 paintings, sculptures, photographs, mixed-media installations, works on paper and new media works in its collection. The Hirshhorn presents varied exhibitions and offers an array of public programs that explore modern and contemporary art. Located at Independence Avenue and Seventh Street S.W., the museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (except Dec. 25). Admission to the galleries and special programs is free. For more information about exhibitions and events, please visit hirshhorn.si.edu. Follow the Hirshhorn on Facebook at facebook.com/hirshhorn and on Twitter at twitter.com/hirshhorn. To request accessibility services, please contact Kristy Maruca at marucak@si.edu or (202) 633-2796, preferably two weeks in advance.

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