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5 of 6



Kira Nam Greene, Orientalism

Ideally, curators do more than put together shows. They have insights, they see trends, they bring out the best of art and the best of artists. They are meant to find new relevance to our times, to the art scene, to the venue.

"Recurrence," an exhibit opening Saturday at [Union College's Mandeville Gallery](#), brings together six artists who, according to [Julie Lohnes'](#) curatorial statement, "delve into the multitude of ideas surrounding repetition in the visual arts." Visitors may ask what repeating lines and resulting patterns might mean outside of academia these days.

An easy entry is the pair of very nice, similar paintings by Rachael Wren. She creates vertical bands that shimmer over an irregular ground like blurry trees from a distance. The pixellated surface is loose enough to never go mechanical, and a welcome array of sharp, bright orange lines form not only the underlying grid but also some sharply disruptive diagonals. Both paintings are gorgeous, although not unfamiliar.

A much simpler echo of this line repetition resembles enlarged fabric design in Simone Meltesen's paintings, one called "Tablecloth." Although less immediately pretty with their direct colors, they pulse a bit, and play nicely with scale and, gently, with nostalgia. Going a step even further to simplification, [Karen Schiff](#) presents a single canvas of a pattern that has been squished and deformed. We get an implied original structure and also this more enlivened, irregular version.

More involving, for me, were Schiff's 20 small studies she calls "Field Notes." "Each drawing begins with a hand-drawn grid of tic-tac-toe signs," she writes. But they go far beyond that simple symbol into reactive variations, like algorithmic malformations. This is the insight of true drawings, seen also in Rachel Wren's two stunning watercolor drawings in the glassed side room. Almost an afterthought to the show, these rise starkly above. Here Wren's process, leading otherwise to more ornamental painting, is laid bare in little marks that move and stop in odd, animated arrays across the barren paper.

A notable fourth painter here, [Kira Nam Greene](#), is less about repetition (per se) and more about excess. "Orientalism I" takes a halved cantaloupe and other still life staples and surrounds them with an invasion of vividly detailed plants and flowers that are flattened onto the surface of the painting, more like wallpaper flourishes than part of the pictorial space. Finely detailed, falling somewhere between comedy and nightmare, this and two smaller counterparts are weirdly sublime.

Not so the installations of the remaining two artists, whose assemblages offer more shouting than revelation.

[Sam Vernon](#)'s installation is anchored by a dozen clear plexiglas cubes on the floor filled with a variety of discarded artworks, each brazenly padlocked. Rising up on two walls are repeated, gritty black Xeroxed

drawings, largely indistinct. The visual effect is partly lost to sloppiness — catalog photographs of earlier installations frankly suggest more careful impact. But her meaning, declared as "Gothic visual art in which Black narratives are included in the expanse of the genre," is lost in ambiguous pretension.

The recycled "trash" and "random items" that make up [Juan Hinojosa](#)'s collages have a catchy flair from across the domed gallery space. But up close, the plainness of the construction feels unfinished and unresolved.

As usual, "Recurrence" has to compete with the astonishing Nott Memorial itself. The gallery has a long history of superb shows within this Victorian triumph, but this show feels incomplete, as if the ideas uniting the works and the works themselves are not sifted out, and are unintentionally stale.

Luckily, there are some genuine perks here, each slyly keen and non-derivative.

William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.