

### MUSEUMS

## Seven Museums Each Tackle a Deadly Sin

by Peter Malone on July 17, 2015



Installation view of 'GOLD' at the Neuberger Museum of Art  
(all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

The Fairfield/Westchester Museum Alliance (FWMA), a recently formed consortium of younger and older museums located just north of New York City, chose to inaugurate its new partnership with simultaneous exhibitions designed to address a widely known if archaic catalogue of human foibles known as the Seven Deadly Sins. The alliance actually counts eight members, but with only seven sins to work with, it became the privilege of Bridgeport, Connecticut's Barnum Museum to absorb the residual authority of early Christian numerology and ride this one out. They are also, coincidentally, currently renovating their facilities.

Theme shows are the art form of the curator, and not surprisingly the topic of sin proved too much for the majority of curators in this project. How does one address sin as a moral subject when our solipsistic notion of visual art leaves little room for soul-searching? Visual artists today rarely address moral difficulties; they choose

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instead to adjudicate them. Sloth, envy, lust, gluttony, greed, wrath, and pride carry little dread anymore because for us they echo a *Real Housewives* episode with its reassuring salve of someone else's transgression.

Unable to address the subject's tougher meaning, those working with contemporary artists fell back to each sin's coyly dramatic potential, which could be, and certainly was, liberally interpreted — with the notable exceptions of the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, both in Connecticut.



Gustave Doré, "The Tower of Babel" (1880), engraving, from 'Pride' at the Bruce Museum ([click to enlarge](#))

The Bruce Museum's Susan Ball and Amanda Skehan took a truly ambitious and scholarly approach, addressing the historical context of the Seven Deadly Sins as expressed in their traditionally didactic form. Pride is a wonderful gathering of prints, rare books, paintings, and other items that trace the varieties of vanitas emblems that were the popular and early offspring of the 16th-century printing press. Images by Albrecht Dürer, Hendrick Goltzius, Honoré Daumier, Gustave Doré, Aubrey Beardsley, and many others, most of them on loan from major university libraries, museums, and private collections, fill the Bruce's main gallery between brief and elegantly informative wall texts.

Aldrich curator Amy Smith-Stewart stands alone for having seen to it that Sloth will address its theme in a direct and even literal manner. In the hands of artist Mats Bigert and Cabinetmagazine editor-in-chief Sina Najafi, the exhibition will open on July 19 with a set of Bob-O-Pedic recliners that will be offered to museum visitors for sitting and perusing the other six museum exhibitions on video monitors. Though hilarious and very much on point, the description I've just given is unlikely

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to compel an actual visit to the Aldrich, as the punchline has already landed — missing spoiler alert noted.

The remaining institutions did their best to make it easy for artists to slip past the land mines of self-examination. The Hudson River Museum's Bartholomew Bland devoted *Envy: One Sin, Seven Stories* entirely to photographer Adrien Broom's take on fairy tales. The large ink-jet prints alongside wall texts that together process envy-laden characters through a fashion aesthetic, strikes an attractive visual balance of image, text, and installation. Like most fiction-oriented photography, *Envy* is a collaborative enterprise, thus Broom generously extended credit to studio assistants Tony Palmieri, Kristen Meyer, and Alonda Baird Juhasz.



Installation view of 'Lust' at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art

The Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, located in Peekskill, New York, got lucky. Director and curator Livia Straus drew *Lust*. For an alternative art venue, nothing says edgy like smut. And yet the subject apparently proved difficult for all involved. For some artists, even the safe harbor of voyeurism was not enough. I found it weird, for example, that a good third of the 13 participating artists use dolls in their methods or in their depictions of sexual relationships. For instance, Cindy Sherman "tackled" sexuality with figurative toys drilled in roughly appropriate locations. Blow-up dolls, dioramas, and claymation made up most of the remaining work. Photographer Larry Clark blended titillation with facetious moralizing. George Condo hid behind sophomoric humor, as did Tony Matelli, whose "Ideal Woman" is a literal visualization of a misogynist joke lifted from *Hustler* magazine. Betty Tompkins alone offers unadulterated sexual imagery,



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though her faint renderings of an especially clinical form of pornography proved as distancing as the rest. All succeeded in dancing around the issue or, as we say in artspeak, each piece was about lust.

Gluttony fell to the Katonah Museum of Art, in the town of the same name. Here, curators Margaret Moulton and Shilpi Chandra deflected any risk of offense toward a statistically overweight population by applying a passive, if not a completely unrelated interpretation onto this most common of personal faults.

They invited artist Emilie Clark to exhibit still-life work made of jars and containers of decaying food and paintings of the same. How ripe — and therefore agriculturally useful — compost addresses over-gourmandizing is not clear to me at all. However the watercolors reveal Clark to be a gifted painter.



Anne Peabody, "Wildfire" (2015), copper, wood, and glass from 'Wrath' at Wave Hill

Not to be outdone in turning moral snags inside-out, Wave Hill, located at the northwest tip of the Bronx, took the audacious (possibly blasphemous) route of liability-reversal. Curators Jennifer McGregor, Gabriel de Guzman, and David Xu Borgonjon pitched the sin of wrath back onto the creator of hurricanes, floods, and inconvenient meteor strikes. While clearly the least respectful of their sin's original meaning, the work in Wrath is varied and impressive. Outstanding in the group are Angela Dufresne's large apocalyptic landscapes, as well as those of Alexis

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Rockman, who works in a similar vein. The most compelling was a beautifully conceived installation by Anne Peabody, who wrapped a room's corner window and fireplace in partially singed copper resembling vines of ivy. Called "Wildfire" (2015), it managed to harmonize the architectural romance of the room with notes of neglect, conflagration, and nature's sublime indifference to it all.

To close the circle, SUNY Purchase's Neuberger Museum of Art attended to the properties of greed, a potent theme, one would think, for an art world run amok with eight-figure auction sales and skyrocketing studio rents. Yet the Neuberger chose to insulate their project from such thorny associations by deftly picking up a fully-formed exhibition titled GOLD, which was curated by curator José Carlos Diaz of Miami Beach's Bass Museum of Art, where the exhibition originated. Though there's nothing inherently wrong with a university gallery making the most of an opportunity to show major artists — GOLD includes works by Sherrie Levine, Chris Burden, and James Lee Byars, among others — the problem is that by swapping greed for gold the Neuberger changed the subject from a promising exploration of avarice to an essay on materials and techniques. And a dull essay it proved to be.



Olga de Amaral, "Strata XI" (2008), linen, gesso acrylic, and gold leaf,  
from 'GOLD' at the Neuberger Museum of Art

The winning formula for getting into this exhibition was as follows: take something — a chaise lounge, bullets, newspapers, old subway posters, a dead bee, a waste paper can, etc. — cover it in gold, then put it in an art gallery. There was one notable

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exception to this overplayed gimmick. Olga de Amaral's "Strata XI," a modestly scaled rectangular wall hanging made of delicately woven bits of gilded linen stitched together to form integrating patterns of arcs and ridges, displayed a rare melding of handicraft and sophisticated design. Each curve and ridge bends the surface toward or away from the light, which made the most of gold's ability to radically change color. Surrounded by a roomful of shiny objects, it was in a class by itself.

Let's face it, most theme shows are conceived for expediency. More often than not they provide a trifling connection between one piece and another that rarely interferes with a viewer's appreciation of each artist's individual effort. So it should be no surprise that the curators played fast and loose with the concept. However — and surely this was unintentional — most of the curators succeeded in illustrating how contemporary artists in general are so confined by a self-imposed insularity that they can only deal superficially with rich subject matter that is more meaningfully engaged in fiction, poetry, theater, and film.

Lust continues at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art (1701 Main Street, Peekskill, New York) through July 26.

Wrath continues at Wave Hill (West 249th Street and Independence Avenue, Bronx, New York) through September 7.

Envy continues at the Hudson River Museum (511 Warburton Avenue, Yonkers, New York) through September 26.

Gluttony continues at the Katonah Museum of Art (134 Jay Street, Katonah, New York) through October 10.

Greed (aka GOLD) continues at the Neuberger Museum of Art (735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, New York) through October 11.

Pride continues at the Bruce Museum (1 Museum Drive, Greenwich, Connecticut) through October 18.

Sloth runs at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (258 Main Street, Ridgefield, Connecticut) from July 19–October 18.