2019 ELEANOR GREENHILL SYMPOSIUM

[Keynote Address]

Dr. Tracy Bonfitto
Monument, Cause, Arena: A Case for Re-thinking Chandigarh’s Rock Garden

Since 2017 Tracy Bonfitto has been the Curator of Art at the Harry Ransom Center at UT Austin. She is a specialist in modern and contemporary South Asian art, and holds a PhD in Art History from UCLA, an MA in Museum Studies from the University of Washington, an MA in Asian Cultures and Languages from UT Austin, and a BA in anthropology and humanities from the University of Northern Iowa. Her professional experience includes affiliations with the Getty Research Institute, the Fowler Museum at UCLA, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In her previous positions, she co-curated the exhibition “Spirits in the Loom: Religion and Design in Lao-Tai Textiles,” and provided curatorial support for The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India Since 1989, Vivan Sundaram’s installation Making Strange, and Ernest Cole, Photographer. Recent research has focused on twentieth-century printmaking practice in America.

[Speakers]

Daisy E. Adams
A Passion for Porcelain: Islamic and Italian Responses to Chinese Export Ware

In “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” anthropologist Alfred Gell suggests that a work of art “achieves its effect via the enchantment cast by its technical means, the manner of its coming into being, or rather, the idea which one forms of its coming into being.” The viewer who is “at a loss to explain how such an object comes to exist in the world” is enchanted by it. His theory of the “enchantment of technology” contained within works of art can be applied to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Islamic and Italian potters’ reactions to imported Chinese porcelain. Both Islamic and Renaissance Italian consumers were familiar with glazed earthenware ceramics and its properties. Glazed earthenware is sturdy, opaque, and heavy; porcelain is light, translucent, and surprisingly strong. Islamic and Italian artisans were unable to comprehend how Chinese potters produced wares with these novel characteristics. This paper examines how their enchantment with this medium inspired them to create earthenware that mimicked Chinese porcelain and to develop their own types of porcelain. The magical quality of Chinese porcelain that enchanted both Islamic and Italian viewers is revealed through contemporary written descriptions. Islamic poets extolled the technical virtues of the medium that Islamic potters were unable to recreate. Similarly, Italian authors placed the medium of porcelain in the same category as gold and silver because of its rarity, elegance, and beauty. While these written sources demonstrate Islamic and Italian consumers’s fascination with porcelain, the large number of earthenware and later stonepaste vessels decorated with blue-and-white chinoiserie designs is the true sign of their enchantment with the medium.
Daisy was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, and attended Pomona College in Claremont, California, where she graduated with a BA in Art History in 2012. She received her MA from the Bard Graduate Center in New York City in 2018. Currently, she is a first-year doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin with a research focus on Italian Renaissance art and material culture.

Diana Luber

Adorning space: Architecture as Embodied Ornament in the Great Mosque of Córdoba

This paper will explore the phenomenological qualities of ornament in the medieval Islamic world through the lens of architecture. By investigating the modes of transmission of architectural knowledge in the Islamic world, I will argue that the built environments of Al Andalus rely upon a framework of experiential knowledge transmission that accentuates the embodied physical experience of architecture as it modifies space and enthralls the viewer. As case studies, I will examine three significant interventions in the construction of the Great Mosque of Córdoba and what they reveal about architectural knowledge transmission in the medieval Islamic world. First, I will consider the initial construction of the mosque by ‘Abd al-Rahman I (r. 756–788), the emir who fled from the Abbasids through North Africa to ultimately consolidate Islamic rule in the Iberian Peninsula. Next, I will consider the additions made to the mosque by ‘Abd al-Rahman III (r. 912–961), the descendant of ‘Abd al-Rahman I who would declare himself caliph of a new dynasty of Umayyad rule based in Al Andalus. Finally, I will consider the use of the Great Mosque of Damascus as a model for the Great Mosque of Córdoba in the tenth century expansion of the structure by Umayyad caliph Al-Hakam II (r. 961–976). I will conclude my discussion by offering a new theory of ornament, in which architecture acts as embodied ornament, in that it actively modifies and adorns the space around the viewer to produce the ultimate experience of wonder, or ‘ajab.

Diana Luber is a first-year Master’s student studying the art and architecture of the medieval Islamic world in the Department of Art History at the University of Texas at Austin. She graduated cum laude from Columbia College, Columbia University in the City of New York with a BA in Art History in May of 2018. She received a Senior Thesis Research Fellowship to conduct independent research in Spain in the summer of 2017, and the Meyer Schapiro Book Prize for Excellence in Art History upon completion of her undergraduate honors thesis, “Power and Magic: On the Performative and Talismanic Properties of Monumental Mudejar in Medieval Zaragoza.” She has held curatorial internships in the Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and at the Historic New Orleans Collection. Her current research focuses on architecture and ornament in the built environments of Al Andalus, as well as issues of center and periphery in the medieval Islamic world.
In 1499, the eighth Aztec ruler, Ahuitzotl, completed one of his last great contributions to his empire’s capital: a new aqueduct. Although initially met with jubilation across Tenochtitlan, the aqueduct soon faltered, flooding the city and causing damage that would eventually take the leader’s life. While this event marked a tragic end to Ahuitzotl’s reign, the monument carved as part of the initial celebration stands today as a reminder of the attempts and accomplishments of Aztec city planning. This monument, named the Acuecuexco Aqueduct Relief after its corresponding waterway, depicts the ruler in a scene of bloodletting, facing the date of the aqueduct’s inauguration and surrounded by feathered serpents. Ahuitzotl was famed for his many conquests that brought significant expansion to the empire, but he did not forsake the capital city, as his self-sacrificial act would suggest. Placing his image in stone at the southernmost boundary, Ahuitzotl could both take credit for the aqueduct and mark the edges of the capital. Using his own image alongside the god Quetzalcoatl, the ruler was able to declare the aqueduct as both a physical and supernatural causeway, guiding the natural and supernatural into the city. By studying the iconography of this Aqueduct Relief Carving, this paper attempts to explore the interrelationships between identity and territory within the Aztec realm, with a specific focus on water management systems. Approaching this work through the lens of art history as well as geography, this project seeks to analyze how ancient people mapped their empires and how these ideas have carried through the colonial period into present-day Mexico City.

Katherine McCarthy is a second-year Master’s candidate studying Mesoamerican Art History with Drs. Julia Guernsey and David Stuart. Her research focuses on intersections of the built and natural environments in Ancient Central Mexico, and often includes comparative studies in the Ancient Andes. This paper is a selection from her current thesis project, which explores water management and imperial monuments in the Aztec Empire.

Kaila T. Schedeen
“The chambermaid, the whore, and the witness”: Carrie Mae Weems’s The Louisiana Project

Commissioned for the Newcomb Art Gallery at Tulane University as part of the Bicentennial commemoration of the Louisiana Purchase, Carrie Mae Weems’s 2003 series The Louisiana Project consists of photographs and video of Weems in and around New Orleans; she appears throughout the images as witness and specter, haunting a number of Louisiana’s antebellum plantation homes and urban spaces. Weems described her performance in the series by stating, “I was not amongst that gentle crowd of ragged negroes gathered together in the evening to stand under the old oak tree and sing sad spirituals, while the gentleman of the house and his guests reflected with glee, the naturalness of their privilege. No, I was the chambermaid, the whore, and the witness.” Within the black and white photographs, she moves thus through the plantation’s internal and external spaces, often with her back turned to the camera. Weems’s refusal to meet the viewer’s gaze more than fleetingly is a rebellion against the historic violence
of slavery and its continued resonances in the deep south. Her actions prompt the question: how can one think of Weems’s cooption of the plantation as speaking to both place itself and the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade through trauma, memory, and haunting? I will argue in this paper that Weems’s use of the figure turned away in The Louisiana Project reorients the gaze towards place as subject, particularly through a politics of privacy that engages the unseen as an inherent part of slavery’s narrative. In her prolonged act looking—what I compare to Tina Campt’s notion of “listening”—Weems guides viewers in confronting the plantation as a site of persistent trauma and identity formation that must continue to be grappled with today.

Kaila Schedeen is a third-year doctoral candidate in art history at the University of Texas at Austin, where she also received her undergraduate degree in 2014. She specializes in contemporary American art with a particular focus on artists within the United States and the Caribbean whose works visualize intersecting histories of representation, identity, and place. Kaila’s dissertation, titled “Turning Back, Looking Forward: Framing Nation and Identity in the Photography of Tseng Kwong Chi, Carrie Mae Weems, and Will Wilson,” examines how these three artists have critically engaged histories of portraiture and landscape to explore discourses of race, nationhood, belonging, and identity. She is also a co-founding member of the curatorial-focused Neon Queen Collective.