

ART REVIEW

Finding the message in the medium

By **ERIC SUTPHIN**
For the Valley News

I've always been drawn to art that resists easy classification. There are certain attributes of a sculpture or painting that we tend to accept as fact.

The formulation is something like "that thing is two-dimensional and shows me something, so it must be a painting." Or "that object is on a pedestal and I can walk around it, so it must be a sculpture." Easy. But when a painting poses as a sculpture, or a wall relief adopts the traits of a collage, that friction between tidy classification and the glorious messiness of art

only contributes to the delight of encountering it.

On view at the William H. & Sonja Carlson Davidow '56 Fine Art Gallery at Colby-Sawyer College in New London, an exhibition aptly titled *Conversations* features the work of Sana Musasama and Jenny Swanson. Both artists use ceramic, albeit in different ways, and eschew traditional forms in favor of more experimental creations. The artists have history: They're friends and colleagues, and each has exhibited widely.

The show is arranged more or less with Swanson's ceramic work along the left side of the space and Musasama's mixed media wall-hung works

along the right. As you circle through the gallery a few times and let the work settle in, you start to see the subtle ways in which the artists are in dialogue with each other. The works whisper across the gallery at each other about notions of fragility, resilience, texture, soft-versus-hard, flatness and space.

Swanson and Musasama seem to hold space for each other. Swanson's lyricism plays well against Musasama's variations on a theme. The latter's messaging is more overt. For example, the *Girl Soldiers* and *Unspeakable* series both draw from her experiences working in Sierra Leone with girls who have been subject to systemic,

ritualized abuse.

Girl Soldiers Series 2 (2012) is a small wall-hung assemblage that features a mummy-like figure set against an oblong clay form that is scarified with markings. A multicolored braid crosses the figure's body, almost like she's holding a jump rope. The work is haunting and echoes a sense of lost youth. As you read more about Musasama's career, it becomes clear that the intense tactility of her work often correlates to the activism that has been a central part of her life for decades.

Swanson's work tends to be lighter in subject and is at-

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Jenny Swanson's piece "What Is Your Footprint" from the show "Sana Musasama & Jenny Swanson: Conversations" on display at Colby-Sawyer College in New London until Dec. 17.

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tuned to nature in a particularly sensitive way. Most of Swanson's work in this exhibition takes the form of large, ceramic discs that are glazed in many combinations of muted tans, rich pewters, creams and blacks. She uses various glaze techniques to achieve different sheens and lusters within each piece. For example, a passage of glass-like silvery gray might blend into a more matte passage. You might think of Swanson's technique as collage in clay.

Screen (2022) features a series of stacked ribbonlike forms and an eye shape against a matte brown disc. The cut-out shapes here, and in other instances, recall the rhythmic forms found in Matisse cutouts from the 1930s. The all-seeing eye is a universal symbol of wisdom and knowledge, and makes for a potent accent.

Groundcover (2022) is a piece set on a pedestal, giving a more traditional sculptural presence. The large disc is covered in curlicue, flower and other organic forms. The dense layer of formed-earthenware and porcelain shapes gives the impression of a forest floor thick with lichen, fungi and other flora that might inhabit the shady ground in the woods. This work was placed near a large picture window that looks out into the mountains and fields, which played well against the undulating patterns that appear on many of the pieces. In *Gathered 2 (2022)*, a frieze of delicate leaflike shapes are ar-



COURTESY PHOTOGRAPH

Ceramic artists Jenny Swanson, left, and Sana Musasama are showing their work at the William H. and Sonja Carlson Davidow '56 Fine Art Gallery at Colby-Sawyer College in New London until Dec. 17.

ranged neatly across the center of the satiny surface.

The works in this exhibition recall a brief but interesting artistic movement in the late 1960s known as "eccentric abstraction," a term coined by feminist art historian Lucy Lippard. The connection exists in the way Musasama and Swanson's work evades classical interpretations of "sculpture." Eccentric abstraction came into being during the

Vietnam War, and the undefinable characteristics of some of that work parallels the incomprehensible tragedy that came as a result. The socio-political implications in Swanson and Musasama's work, which include climate change and human rights, suggests a similar formal impulse.

Musasama's *Pandemic Survival Mode* series features small, roundish conglomerations of ceramic, yarn, thread, sewing needles and other materials. A selection of these are displayed in a row along a wall in the gallery. As you examine their bumpy surfaces and multicolored adornments, they recall old-school pin cushions or thorny coronavirus cells. They emit a kind of neurotic energy, which makes sense given that they were made at the height of the pandemic under lockdown.

Each artist reveals in their own way how art can hold a mirror to the world to reveal things both tragic and sublime.

Jenny Swanson and Sana Musasama: Conversations is on view at the William H. & Sonja Carlson Davidow '56 Fine Art Gallery at Colby-Sawyer College through Dec. 17. More information at www.colby-sawyer.edu/gallery.



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