

VISUAL ARTS: EVENT

# Running Amok with the Artists Drawing Club



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EXPLORE: VISUAL ARTS, VISUAL ARTS: EVENT



On the last Thursday of each month, the Asian Art Museum becomes a playground for Bay Area contemporary artists, and by proxy, museum visitors, thanks to the Artists Drawing Club. Currently in its second season, the Drawing Club invites artists to create site-specific artworks and programming. And through these public events, the museum trades the expected for the unexpected, breathing new life into old objects, and creating a rare forum for both dialogue and experimentation.

The program started in 2013 under the direction of the AAM's Marc Mayer, educator for public programs. Supporting new interactive works, in its pilot year the Drawing Club involved eight artists, including Amy M. Ho, Ranu Mukherjee, Radka Pulliam, and Weston Teruya.

Through the club, artists delve into the museum's permanent collection, rotating exhibits, architecture, and neighborhood, creating tours, drawing assignments, social media events, and more. For the most recent iteration, on the evening of May 22, the collaborative duo Hughen/Starkweather (Amanda Hughen and Jennifer Starkweather) presented **Re:depiction**, six elegant works on paper with accompanying audio tracks. The large pigment prints, each 48 by 36 inches, hung on either side of the museum's grand staircase. Opposite each colorful and highly detailed blend of line and brushwork was a pair of headphones, linked to each artwork by a matching sticker.



Hughen/Starkweather, *Shiho Sasaki, Album of Lacquer*, 2014; Courtesy of the artists and the Asian Art Museum

Insulated against the ricochet of sound coming off the marble stairs, the headphones played excerpts from interviews with six AAM staff members. Miriam Mills, a museum storyteller, described “imaginary shapes and figures.” Shiho Sasaki, painting conservator, told a story that was “warm but a little bit sad.” And Qamar Adamjee, Associate Curator of South Asian Art, relayed a tale in which the deity Vishnu takes the form of “half man, half lion.”

Their voices, and those of the three other interviewees — John Stucky, museum librarian; Jay Xu, Museum Director; and Susan Williams, museum security guard — describe objects in the museum chosen by the interviewees. As Starkweather related to Mayer on the AAM's blog, “Although we had planned questions in advance, the conversations meandered, frequently becoming more about the personal connection the interviewee had to the artwork.” In some instances the excerpts are just as abstract as their visual results.



A museum visitor reads the **Re:depiction** handout; Photo courtesy of the Asian Art Museum

The material, all hinting at physical objects just a short distance away, made **Re:depiction** feel like an elaborate — and very fun — treasure hunt. Gripping my handout, complete with small scale versions of each Hughen/Starkweather print, interview excerpts and a labelled map of the museum, I charged up the stairs in search of *Jar with tiger and magpie*.

The three connecting versions of the objects on view — Hughen/Starkweather's renderings, the interviewees' descriptive words, and my own successful identifications (in a room filled with Vishnus, the object IDs came in handy) — were met in each instance by traditional museum plaques. Conditioned to read every plaque I come across, here I resisted, instead relying on the words and images that originated with the six museum staff members.

Hughen/Starkweather's *Miriam Mills, Jar* resembles an overhead view of a cobalt tropical storm, swirling washings and delicate marks perfectly capturing Mills' musing, “It reminds me of being a child and laying on my back in the grass.” Upon meeting the actual jar, it was remarkably similar in mood, if not in exact form. For *Qamar Adamjee, Hindu Deity Vishnu*, the collaborative correctly depicted the flames on either side of the stone figure — the print shows an amorphous blob fanned by fire. *Jay Xu, Ritual Vessel* is based on a description of one of the museum's most visible items, a grinning bronze vessel shaped like a rhino that was affectionately nicknamed “Avery” after the museum's main benefactor. In Hughen/Starkweather's interpretation, only the rhino's horn is identifiable, as the rest of the body succumbs to what Xu describes as “a terrible skin disease.”



Ritual object, Shang dynasty (1600–1050 BCE); Courtesy of the Asian Art Museum

As a collaborative, Hughen/Starkweather's work with the museum, its staff, and the public is a fluid expansion of their practice. A handout available the night of the event invited the public to participate in a similar process of narration and description, highlighting their own picks from the museum. But even without this added layer of interactivity, **Re:depiction**, an intimate transformation of the museum's collection by those most intimately involved in its upkeep, was a great pleasure, especially when I successfully tracked down each and every special piece. For your own “AHA!” moments within the Asian Art Museum, be sure to attend future meetings of the Artists Drawing Club.

**Re:depiction** took place at the Asian Art Museum on May 22, 2014. Future Artists Drawing Club programming includes **Palimpsest** on June 26 with Ajit Chauhan, events with Michael Arcega on July 24 and Jung Ran Bae on August 28. For [more information](http://more information) visit [asisanart.org](http://asisanart.org).