

ART

Explore the depths of your own psyche at Walker Fine Art's "Layers of Existence"

The exhibition is an exploration of identity, real and imagined

By [Ray Mark Rinaldi](#), *Special to The Denver Post* · Nov 23, 2019, 6:00 am

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Mark Penner-Howell's "Nest" at Walker Fine Art. (Provided by Walker Fine Art)

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That would appear to make it, at least on the surface, out of synch with the times. Who wants to probe self-identity in the middle of a communal crisis of government and the environment? Artists ought to be screaming about social issues right now, and at a high volume.

But I found it to be just the opposite. That’s mostly because the art on display suggests that we need to get our own houses in order before we start demanding the demolition of other people’s houses, to consider how we form

beliefs and character and how we take those things out into the world with us. And because no art can truly separate itself from current events, it ends up serving as a smart and complicated examination of all that anxiety we’re feeling.

If you go

“Layers of Existence” will be up through Jan. 4 at Walker Fine Art., 300 W. 11th Ave. It’s free to visit. Info at 303-355-8955 or walkerfineart.com.

Only it comes packaged in some very pretty wrappers.

Take Meagen Svendsen’s three-dimensional installation, “Balloons and Hummingbirds,” for example. Attached to the wall of Walker Fine Art, it has all the makings of an overly sentimental piece of art. It’s fabricated from white ceramic that has been shaped into a scene featuring 10 happy, helium-filled balloons and a flock of delicate little hummingbirds that flies all around them.

But the hummingbird beaks are actually made from sharp and pointy steel needles, and they’re flying a little too close to the balloons for comfort. Things could go pop at any minute.

Svendsen uses this as a metaphor for hopes raised and dashed, for the way we process optimism and deal with disappointment. It speaks to the moment, but on a personal level.



Farida Hughes' "Couple B" is part of the exhibit "Layers of Existence." (Provided by Walker Fine Art)

"Layers of Existence" goes on like that. Farida Hughes' series of resin and oil paintings on wood panels feature eye-appealing blobs of overlapping colors — bright and fruity blues, yellows, reds and greens. From a distance, you might think the paintings are standard examples of corporate art, color and polish just for the sake of color and polish.

Up close, however, the fluid shapes reveal themselves to be human head-like forms. She means these works to be "portraits" of a sort, though without eyes, ears and noses. Instead, they're all emotion, thought, introspection. Layers and layers of those things. They're lively, but also difficult.

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There’s more layering in the exhibit. Artist Sabin Aell’s “Wanderlust” is a series of collages of colorful, landscape photos covered over with sheets of opaque stainless steel. The artist cuts “windows” in the steel panels so viewers only get a small glimpse of the photo collage behind them — just a tease of what’s underneath.



A piece from Sabin Aell's "Wanderlust" series.
(Provided by Walker Fine Art)

In this case, the layering evokes the passing of time and the evolution of memory. There’s a narrative implied in each one of them that is part fact and part sensory recollection, and they mirror the way we build our life stories, combining the things we see with the things we feel.

Mark Penner-Howell offers a more visually straightforward (but no less complicated) exploration of identity. His portraits, of realistic though anonymous people, are rendered in color pencil and acrylic on wood panel. They focus on the concept of duality, sometimes quite literally.

His “Astronaut,” for example, appears to be a play on Michelangelo’s “Pieta,” the revered marble statue featuring the Virgin Mary holding a fallen, adult Jesus on her lap.

Penner-Howell turns the scene into a painting, but uses the same figure — a very contemporary, young guy in jeans and sneakers — as a substitute for both of the characters in the original work. This dude is holding himself on his lap. He's both living and dead, strong and weak, lost and found.

There's other contemplative work in the show: Peter Illig's dreamy and fantastic, film-noir-inspired oil paintings — meant to capture the “mini-dreams” we have as we fall asleep — are bold, sexy and a little bit scary.

Just as dreamy: Gail Folwell's life-size plaster casts of human heads, which contain secret and super-tiny bronze human figures inside of them.

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“Layers of Existence” gets extra points because it takes place in a commercial space. In most cases, for-profit galleries build their public exhibitions around the recent work of one or two of the artists on their roster and avoid thinking too heavily about how it all comes together. That doesn't mean the shows are bad; they just lack the kind of depth a group show can achieve.

But this exhibit is actually curated around a theme, and that's a plus. It remains a showcase for Walker's artists — the goal is to sell work, not just put it on display — and it does have the shine of a neatly assembled commercial showcase. There's nothing rough around the edges like you see at a nonprofit contemporary art museum.

Still, it's an elevated event and worth a stop. It helps that Walker Fine Art is one of the most attractive art spaces in town; it's just a pleasant place to hang out. The show continues through the new year, making it a swell break during any moment of holiday stress.

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