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Montclair Arts Talk

By [Carol Selman](#) [Email the author](#) 2:00am

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New Directions: Marina Zurkow Takes Off at MAM

Contemporary digital art captivates and challenges in contemporary show now through Jan. 8, 2012.

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Winter, from the series Mesocosm (Northumberland, UK), 2011 Credit courtesy of the Montclair Art Museum

Alexandra Schwartz, the Montclair Art Museum's (MAM) first curator of contemporary art, has been hinting at something astounding for her inaugural exhibit.

And something astounding is here. MAM's "New Directions" series has launched with the just-opened "Marina Zurkow, Friends, Enemies and Others." The exhibit runs through Jan. 8, 2012. The New Directions series will present solo exhibitions by contemporary artists throughout the whole year.

Brooklyn-based digital artist Marina Zurkow attended Barnard College and earned a B.F.A from The School of Visual Arts in 1985. Much published and extensively exhibited from California to Croatia—with stops at the Walker Art Center and the Brooklyn Museum—the artist and educator's list of awards, grants, and prestigious arts residencies fill many pages. She is currently a Guggenheim Fellow.

Zurkow's works have been screened at the Sundance Film Festival and were part of the Smithsonian's 2010 "American Video Art" show.

In other words, Zurkow is hot and the Montclair art scene just got a lot hotter.

[Schwartz](#), whose curriculum vitae is similarly dazzling, talked about the new show:

"We are thrilled to be inaugurating our 'New Directions' series with Marina Zurkow's work. Digital art has become one the most important media for contemporary art," Schwartz said in an email. "Marina's digital animations and prints seamlessly blend the old and the new. While they address important ecological and political issues, their whimsical nature appeals to kids as well. They are also just gorgeous to look at, and the response to

them has been amazing."

I missed the big, community opening this past Saturday evening—the jazz guitarist/museum buddy/husband had played the Swiss Global/Oskar Schindler Jazz Festival, and I was covering the music.

That means we missed the special, outdoor installation of screens and viewings of additional Zurkow’s animations, but it also means that late this past Sunday afternoon, we were not fighting crowds to absorb Zurkow’s vision.

“Friends, Enemies, and Others” is deeply political and political at many levels, and it is mesmerizing.

It opens with two animations, the 17-minute, 42-second “Slurb”—think suburb and slum—a full color imagination of Tampa, Florida as a city submerged by water. There are diverse images, some evoking Japanese anime. The soundtrack by Lem Jay Ignacio follows John Cage/Steve Reich minimalism and computer generated music. It simultaneously disturbs and enchants, which is true of all Zurkow’s works.

The two-minute, 44-second “Weights and Measures,” with floating and sinking elephants, airplanes, plankton, rolling cog wheels, and other one cell life forms, has its own strange beauty.

Zurkow goes seamlessly back and forth between video, computer pieces, animated works and stills—“Heraldic Crests for Invasive Species” are 12 letterpress prints executed with the drawing assistance of Ellen Anne Burtner.

These crests brilliantly encapsulate the long story of invasive species— from wild boars to zebra mussels—in Northumberland, England. The works’ subtext skewers the British class system and all human-conceived hierarchies.

These invasive species are also players in the show’s centerpiece, the 146-hour-long video, “Mesocosm, Northumberland, UK” on view in the final room preceded by “Mesocosm,” —“Winter,” Spring,”“Summer,” ”Autumn” (2011), stills from the video produced as archival pigment prints.

(Among the many levels of Zurkow’s work is her deliberate evocation of art history; paintings of the four seasons abound in Asian and European art. Schwartz elucidates this and other references to the canon in the exhibit’s introductory wall text.)

Of the “Heraldic Crests,” I spent time with the crest for the mitten crab. Its design incorporates fish nets and cargo ships, the means by which the crabs have spread. Each crest includes a Latin motto and if, like me, your high school Latin is very rusty—forgive me, dear Miss May—there are explanatory guides at the exhibits entrance, which include translations:

Non Sine Periculo-Not Without Danger

Before going to the crowning “Mesocosm,” some personal history. In the 1990s, I spent a week with English friends, a couple in the arts, at their home in Northumberland. On my own, I walked the footpaths and villages, immersed in nature’s sound track: lowing sheep and cows.

Zurkow’s Northumberland is and is not mine.

Zurkow’s “Mesocosm, Northumberland, UK, seats a corpulent, nude male on a tree stump; the figure is based on the Lucien Freud painting “Naked Man, Back View” (1991-92) of British fashion designer and performance artist Leigh Bowery.

Executed in black and white, the figure becomes our everyman as an earth like moon rises and sets in the sky, and people and creatures—many from the invasive crests series—play out their dramas on the landscape. Color appears briefly, punctuations of red, as creatures of the earth and air crawl his back, raising blood with tooth, claw, beak or talon.

On video, the everyman is impassive, then he is not: I walked into the early part of “June 20.” In the 146 hour video, each minute of the video represents an hour in a day—you can see the date and time of day in small numerals on the upper left hand corner. (You won’t see exactly what I saw; computer generated, the video is different each time it plays.)

June 20, could be the summer solstice, and as I watched, engrossed, the action in the central part of the screen spilled over to screen right and left.

Late in that screen day, as the moon/sun/planet rose, so did our everyman, lumbering away to stage right. Then, from stage left, he returns to retake his seat, but not before beating out—arms aloft—a silent invocation.

You can view a 30 second video clip of “Mesocosm” at www.montclairartmuseum.org/marinazurkow

Group tours may be arranged; Zurkow will present an “Artist Tour and Conversation,” on Tuesday, Nov. 8 at 7 p.m., \$10 members, \$15 nonmembers; call now; there is only room for 25. Call (973) 259-5136.

The Montclair Art Museum is at 3 South Mountain Avenue, Montclair. See website or call (973) 746-5555 for hours, directions and admissions information.

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