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ART REVIEW: "Mentors & Makers" at Rochester Contemporary

By [Rebecca Rafferty](#) on February 9, 2011

Rochester Contemporary's annual "Mentors and Makers" exhibition shows off the caliber of artist-educators affiliated with our region's colleges and universities, and the work of artists they have trained and influenced. All four artists in this year's exceptional show have ties with RIT: three are graduates and one teaches within the school and is an artist-in-residence. The work of artists and married couple Wendell Castle and Nancy Jurs, and their former students Tom Lacagnina and Bethany Krull, vary greatly in style and theme, but each piece in this exhibit is a testament to extreme dedication to craftsmanship, the mastering of materials, as well as the exploration of the complex world through creative expression.

World-renowned craftsman, artist, and educator Wendell Castle contributed three works to the exhibit, ranging in function from an organically formed chair, to a monolith of a time piece, to a cherry-red sports car of a rocking chair. The shape of the legs on the latter work, "Temptation Rocker," is in fact a nod to the exaggerated forward-leaning motion of an animated racing automobile, as the artist explained at the February 6 artist talk at the gallery. The large rocking chair is a work of wood buried in silicon-finished fiberglass, all fluid lines and elongated elliptical base, and a fun play on the kinetic nature of the swaying seat.

Castle's other chair, "Rainbow Fire," is a richly dark organic bench of Peruvian walnut with an oil finish; unpainted, it clearly shows off his woodworking skills. The functional "Topeka Clock" is made up of two large polychromed fiberglass and urethane pieces: the low and leaning donut hints at the feminine and is accented with shimmering pink flecks all over its off-white surface, and the planer, erect masculine counterpart stands taller than the viewer and has a ring of golden numbers on its tapered cap, which rotates as it keeps time. In the round room at the rear of the space, viewers can appreciate the 28-minute film of an absorbed Castle on-project in 1964.

Nancy Jurs is wife to Wendell Castle, a graduate of RIT, educator, and a famed artist in her own right. Ten works of clay and reclaimed objects line the long wall of the gallery, each a clay torso within a frame that resembles a life-sized armored chest plate or an animal face, some slipping easily between the two. This is intentional; Jurs

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"Leashed Hercules: On Display," a ceramic work by Bethany Krull, part of the "Mentors & Makers" exhibit at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED

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describes them as manifestations of some things she feels protective over: girls and animals. The armor is too narrow for a man, and could easily be seen on a young woman. "Illusion," for example, has tiny slits in the chest that might be eyes, and "No Fear" looks exactly like the face of a bat. The surface of each of the works is marked upon in a different way, and with carefully applied copper patina, they truly resemble worn metal, bearing a history and set within a frame as a relic. Viewers can also catch a peek at Jurs in the studio, in the 19-minute film looping in the round room, which documents her creation of "Triad," the installation that was removed from the Greater Rochester International Airport in 2006.

Former student of Wendell Castle, educator, and accomplished craftsman Tom Lacagnina explores form as well as unanswerable concepts in his woodwork. In some of his pieces, the Alfred University School of Art & Design professor emeritus tries to retain the original outer shapes, and gouges out the inner material. "I'd Rather Drink Muddy Water" shows off the organic shape of a tree trunk while transforming its bulk into a featherweight by comparison; stripped of bark and entirely smooth, the naked log is also hollow, and every inch of its insides is marked with long, rippling gouges. Propped up by a metal stand to lie on its side at eye-level, viewers can peer through the tunnel at one another. "The Way Light Hits a Fluted Column" is again carved from a single tree trunk, a tall, fluted column where only the outer ridges remain, with negative space standing in for the center, and the spaces between the ridges form a narrow cage of sorts.

Other works by Lacagnina include "Where My Secret Desires Lie Hidden," two separate works of men made of wood climbing a thin golden ladder or thin golden staircase to a platform with a golden door cracked open, beckoning.

The youngest member of the show by decades, former student of Nancy Jurs and emerging artist Bethany Krull already has an impressive resume filled with residencies, exhibitions, and institutions that have collected her work, and she currently serves as ceramics instructor at Goggleworks in Reading, Pennsylvania. Krull's work in this show is mainly porcelain, with some cast bronze and other materials used for staging. Her art expresses her interest in the complicated relationship between humans and nature, most specifically in this case with animals we have attempted to domesticate.

In exploring the give-and-take complexities, "Dominance and Affection" nails Krull's thesis and easily moves the viewer emotionally. From this body of work, "Surrogate" is by far the most captivating, a colorless porcelain sculpture of a baby monkey piggy-backing and clutching a stuffed toy monkey given to it as a surrogate mother. The creature comes alive with a wide-eyed stare and tiny, delicately clawed fingers striving to learn the face of its "mother," as every infant does. Krull's "In Servitude" Nos. 1-8 are oversized porcelain beetles, their bubble-bodies mirrored by the burden of the earthenware pottery strapped to their backs.

"Mentors & Makers"

Through March 13

Rochester Contemporary Art Center, 137 East Ave.

Wed-Sun 1-5 p.m. | \$1 | 461-2222, rochestercontemporary.org

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