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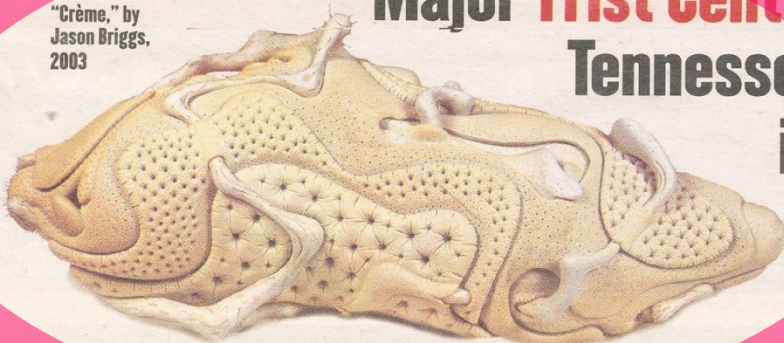
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# A SENSE OF PLACE... OR NOT?

"Portrait of Mary Eliza Washington,"  
by John Wood Dodge, 1842



"Crème," by  
Jason Briggs,  
2003



Major **Frist Center** exhibition explores Tennessee's artistic identity—  
if there is such a thing

BY DAVID MADDIX

# A Sense of Place... or Not?

## Major Frist Center exhibition explores Tennessee's artistic identity— if there is such a thing

by [David Maddox](#)

The Art of Tennessee

Through Jan. 18, 2004  
Frist Center for the Visual Arts,  
919 Broadway. 244-3340  
also showing at  
Tennessee State Museum,  
505 Deaderick St. 741-2692

A show like “The Art of Tennessee” starts with a problem. What does the title mean? It’s easy enough to say that the exhibit includes art created in, for and about Tennessee, and art by people from Tennessee. But what does this add up to? After seeing this exhibit, will I now see an object and know it comes from Tennessee? Has the state produced unique forms or styles, beyond the signatures of individual makers? Will this show help define the identity of the state?

The answer to these questions is probably no. But by collecting a set of art associated with the state, the show gives an accounting of Tennessee’s visual culture. And, as always with an exhibit of this size, there are some wonderful objects to see regardless of context.

The exhibit has important qualities you want from a show like this. It is broadly representative in terms of culture, artistic style, history and medium. In addition to painting and sculpture, it includes functional art: furniture, ceramics, textiles, silversmithing, etc. It has a clear chronological arrangement, starting with works from the indigenous cultures of the region before white settlement. The show includes two locations, with works on display at the Frist Center and the State Museum. Though the Frist contains the bulk of the exhibit—which constitutes the focus of this review—the State Museum has many fine pieces of contemporary art and historical furniture, some of it rarely on public view.

To make a sweeping generalization, Tennessee’s visual culture has been based on self-reliance and function more than innovation. Tennessee during much of its early period was isolated, literally the backwoods. In that environment, people needed to provide for the necessities of life and to re-create some of the fineness of life elsewhere. That meant the production of functional objects and some market for luxury items, such as paintings. Even some of the luxury items had a functional purpose: for example, portraits of family members to remember them between generations or after an untimely death.

After the Civil War, the pieces change in character—a little less functional, with more emphasis on fine art. At first, the works are derivative, such as the Impressionist canvases (though that’s true of most American Impressionists). As the 20th century rolls around, Tennessee is more like other places. You have some artists working with local themes in a conservative style (Carroll Cloar for one), which is probably typical of most places outside of the very few art capitals. The state has also contributed a few people to larger movements, such as Red Grooms and Robert Ryman, who’ve developed internationally recognized styles not dependent on local themes. One exception might be William Eggleston, whose color photographs have been extremely

influential and are highly rooted in the Delta. The state has also attracted a few important artists from elsewhere, most notably Aaron Douglas, who came to teach at Fisk University.

As “The Art of Tennessee” moves into contemporary work, the question of place seems to evaporate. The world is more mobile, and information and images communicate much more readily. The artists in the last few rooms dedicated to contemporary art come from all over the world. Tennessee is providing a home for these people to do high-level work, but it’s not clear that the idea of local styles makes much sense in the 21st century. People anywhere can participate in various strands of a bewildering global cultural soup.

The show includes crafts as much as painting and sculpture, and the place of the state might be different here. Outside of some basket makers from Cannon County, it is hard to say that there are unique Tennessee styles shown here—many of the contemporary makers come from outside the state. However, this part of the world is an undeniably important center for crafts in America, with the Appalachian Center for Crafts in Smithville and the Arrowmont School in Gatlinburg, as well as Penland and Berea in adjoining North Carolina and Kentucky. In addition, fairs, festivals and shops keep local traditions alive in Tennessee, similar to the vitality Southern music maintains on the grassroots level.

Because this exhibit is representative, laid out on a largely chronological basis, the loose organization means there is no curatorial voice guiding the viewer by the nose. This allows us to pick our own threads and follow them through. Three threads struck me strongly.

### **The face of death**

Upon entering the galleries at the Frist, one of the first objects viewers encounter is a kneeling sandstone ancestor figure from the indigenous Mississippian culture of 1300-1500 CE. The figure is bulky and strong. Scholars have not been able to piece together much detail on the beliefs and practices of the pre-Columbian civilizations in Tennessee. But if we accept that this is an ancestor figure, it is an interesting way to start the show. It makes us realize that the function of many of the oil paintings shown here is to preserve the spirit of ancestors—to capture not just their images, but aspects of their personalities.

Right next to the sandstone figure is a ceramic jar that picks up a death theme. It has a wide body onto which its maker affixed sculpted human skulls and heads in alternation. The meaning of the piece is open to interpretation, thanks again to the lack of information on the religious beliefs in the Mississippian culture. It could represent the skulls and decapitated heads of defeated enemies, or the interplay of life and death. For a contemporary viewer, it certainly has a dramatic impact as a memento mori.

A little farther on are three miniatures by John Wood Dodge, a painter who worked in Nashville before the Civil War. Two are portraits of dead children. One of Mary Eliza Washington is done on a locket. She has dark patches under her eyes and close cropped hair, looking as she must have soon before death. Behind her gather pink sunset clouds, giving a glow to the entire picture. It is surprising that the family would want this portrait, which remembers her as she is dying and not as a healthy child. In a somewhat larger portrait of another child, Felix Grundy Eakin, the subject is not so obviously at death’s door, though he is surrounded by symbolism of death: a broken toy, wilted flowers, an urn and those same billowing pink sunset clouds.

This room is dominated by a large painting of Ellen Thomas by Washington Bogart Cooper. She is a young woman, wearing a white dress with strong blue diagonals, which give the work that much more presence. It turns out she died soon after the portrait was done. Her family would have been left with this life-sized portrait that calls attention to itself loudly; it would keep their dead daughter present with them. The Dodge miniatures and this large portrait by Cooper are all extremely functional pieces: Their role is to preserve the memory and emotions associated with these lost family members. And this is domestic art, private, not grand.

After these domestic images, the show has a room with public art, including several portraits of Andrew Jackson. There is a Roman-style marble bust, an equestrian portrait, a portrait with the symbols of his office. The last Jackson portrait differs from these. Here, he is an old man painted on a simple dark background, with no symbolic insertions. He is not the commander in this picture, but mortal and frail. No longer gazing into the impersonal distance, he looks at us directly. It is as if the public figure fell away in his last days, leaving behind the weak creature we all are.

Right next to him is a daguerreotype of Sam Houston during his years as a senator from Texas. This, by contrast, is a strong figure, a man of power in his maturity. He was photographed at full-length, his arms crossed, and his face has a sternness and intelligence that suggests he will win in most situations. However, because this is a daguerreotype, the image is also ghost-like. If you look at it from the wrong angle, the image disappears, and all you get is reflecting surface. You have to chase the image, moving around until you can find an angle where it holds steady. Even then, it is light, nothing but grays, a trace of an image.

In a museum, much of what we do is look at ghosts. The portraits are of people long dead, by people who are gone. Sure, there are contemporary museums, and this show certainly has a whole selection of contemporary works, but the idea of a museum is that the objects will stay there for generations, outliving their makers and subjects. This is something we can see even in the more recent works from “The Art of Tennessee.” William Eggleston’s 1970 picture of a tricycle left on a suburban sidewalk in Memphis is just as much a part of the past. What child has a metal trike now? Wouldn’t the toy be plastic today? William Sawyer’s picture of a girl in an urban streetscape also stays in the past, with prices in the barbershop window advertising 75 cents for a haircut. Even the furniture and other objects are ghosts, artifacts of a way of life that is past. They’re chimera, brittle shells of a former existence. And yet these things and these long-gone people are more concrete than our own current lives—in which everything keeps twisting and squirming, changing shape at every opportunity. These objects have settled into a final form that we can rely on.

### **The place of the present when surrounded by the past**

If museums concern themselves with the past and its ghosts, galleries by contrast are typically concerned with living artists. You don’t expect every work in a gallery to reach masterpiece status. It’s fine for some of it to be ephemeral. But once a work of art takes its place in a museum, it attains a sense of weightiness; it can come across as stilted, and it has to *overcome* its content to hold up.

Technically, the Frist isn’t really a museum, since it has no permanent collection—hence its designation as a “center for the visual arts.” This leaves the institution free to take different directions in its programming. One path is to behave like a museum, to compensate for Nashville’s lack of a major museum collection by bringing in pieces of collections from other places. Given the amount of space and the flexibility gained from not having a permanent collection, the Frist Center could also mount large-scale programs more closely tied to the present. Major facilities such as PS1 in New York, the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans and the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston do this.

This show, of course, finds the Frist Center in full museum mode. It is a serious effort of remembrance. A key to remembrance is forgetting: We construct an understanding of the past around narratives formed as much by what we leave out as what we include. As the years go by, we forget about the other things going on in a historical epoch and focus on the few people or objects that we choose as important. John Wood Dodge rises to the surface; other names fade. Those left out have no voices to protest their exclusion, unless someone chooses to speak for them.

Narrative’s mandate to forget makes it very difficult to talk about the present. In the contemporary world, it is not so easy to ignore all that is going on, everything that might fall outside the narrative you want to construct as a way of bringing order to what otherwise is chaos. Too bad for the pursuit of tidiness, but those you would

leave out speak up for themselves. This argues for taking very different approaches to the past and the present. For the past, you can select the few and best. For the present, breadth helps. It is hard to mix these two approaches in one show.

In the interest of comprehensiveness, the Frist Center has of course selected some contemporary artists to represent artistic activity in Tennessee today. Leaving out contemporary artists would have come across poorly, perhaps implying that there is nothing of value occurring today, and yet the memory palace of this show is not necessarily a good home for the living. The context lacks liveliness, which is exacerbated by some limits of the show. "The Art of Tennessee" does not include some of the many media that give contemporary art its liveliness: video, pieces with sound, performance-based art, installations. This is understandable, given the space available and the potential for sound and video to interfere with the other sections. But it makes the contemporary world seem a little narrower than it is.

The light curatorial hand comes in clearly here. The show doesn't try to say anything about what characterizes art in Tennessee today, other than a lot of people from other places are working here. Pieces do seem grouped together on the basis of common stylistic threads: the two ceramic pieces by Jason Briggs and Sylvia Hyman; four artists whose techniques, images and materials strongly evoke the past (Alicia Henry, Andrew Saftel, Greely Myatt and Jim Collins); and four figurative works, one each by John Baeder, Robert Durham, Jed Jackson and Marilyn Murphy. As an example, if you look at the last four as a group, it is not clear how well they go together in terms of purpose. Durham's "Deconstructing Baby" uses biting sarcastic imagery to send up art criticism. John Baeder gives us one of his careful realist paintings, this time of a diner in New Hampshire. Jed Jackson's "CEO" evokes cartoons with its four panels and thought balloons. Marilyn Murphy's "Cane Fire" is an ominous drawing that mixes images of raging fire with machinery and control. The curatorial voice doesn't intrude to tie these pieces together, though of course it is hard to imagine saying much about the place of figuration in contemporary art in Tennessee over just four pieces. That's the inevitable problem with a quick survey of art today.

It's not clear from this show, but the visual arts community in Tennessee today may be poised better than ever to reach a level of vitality and originality that is not in much evidence in earlier periods. Most of the earlier work followed styles established elsewhere rather than blazing trails: The John Wood Dodge miniatures, as fine as they are, are not innovative in art historical terms. In the 20th century, many of the artists represented came here as teachers, emissaries of the larger art world, bringing with them ideas developed outside the state. The Frist show does not convey the sense that there was a strong art community here that drew people in, where their energies and ideas would breed and multiply, producing work that people outside the region would notice and associate with this place.

This may happen in Nashville soon. Its schools, galleries and exhibition spaces have the potential to create and support a critical mass of people engaged with visual art. It may be the case that people in every epoch have claimed to see the same signs of emergence. When it is time to put today's art in a museum instead of a gallery, we will see how rich the soil here is now.

### **Vessels: from function to contemplation**

One of the admirable things about this show is that it consistently includes functional works in many media, including ceramics, furniture and weaving. The past and present seem to coexist more easily in these media, and the show includes craft works from the very start. Two of the pieces from indigenous cultures are ceramic jars: the death's head jar described above, as well as one with a dog's legs, head and tail built into the body. There is also a simple woven Cherokee basket of later vintage, which has dusky colors and solid rectangular mass.

The early years of white settlement are represented by functional pieces from local potteries, each with its own typical glaze scheme. The decorations on these early commercial ceramics are abstract, reflecting the nature of the materials while also pointing toward an embrace of art as material object, not just image, that defines much contemporary art. The two earthenware jars from the Haun pottery have a complicated surface with several levels of depth: a blue-green base glaze, spots of the red earthenware clay color coming out, swoops of darker glaze decoration across it, and decorative patterns pressed into the clay. This surface goes beyond two dimensions and provides a field with depth where you can let your eyes move between the color and texture of different layers.

A few feet away stands a large stoneware jar made by T.W. Craven. The piece has a strong, solid form, divided in half horizontally by a ribbon decoration. At first glance, the piece seems plain, with only this small bit of decoration, but the surface is not uniform. Slight flaws and variations start to come out: brown spots and lines here and there, two bluish drops on the back. The surface has been ornamented by the aleatoric tendencies of clay and glaze to behave in ways that the maker cannot entirely control.

A little farther along, there is more stoneware, but now pieces that are figurative and fanciful, like the Mississippian dog vase. One is a chicken waterer with a comedic goateed head, the other a black jar with a grimacing head, complete with white teeth made from inserted pieces of broken china. The potters have moved past pure functionality to novelty.

Vessels—pots and baskets—figure prominently in the contemporary crafts galleries as well. One of the best pieces in the show, in any medium, is a stoneware vase by Earl Hooks titled “Celestial Body.” Hooks threw a spherical form and then made the surface uneven by flattening it in places and bringing up ridges to form circles surrounding and small protuberances here and there. He used a gray-green chrome glaze that has subtle shifts of color. Like the early commercial potters, Hooks allows the behavior of the clay and glaze to provide random variations. The result is an ethereal work that captures the sense of mystery in distant celestial bodies without being directly representational.

Near Hooks’ pot is a strong piece by Charles Counts, a spherical stoneware jar whose surface has been scored with vertical lines and circles in a stylized depiction of a forest. The lip of the vase and its interior are glazed in deep blue, so color blooms as you move further into the piece. It seems appropriate that these contemporary artists are working in the same homely stoneware used by their predecessors in Tennessee. There is a timelessness to the material. Though they’re of entirely different generations and centuries, T.W. Craven and Earl Hooks both maintain a balance between intentional control and accepting what the materials give.

In the same room with these two pots, there is a case with baskets by Dee Merritt Gregory, Dennis Gregory and Mary Haley Prater, weavers from Cannon County. This is one of the few places in the show where a unique Tennessee style is called out. These basket makers weave from undyed oak strips, using tight, delicate knots, which with their plain color give the works a feel that is so bright and pure, it is as if any blemishes or darkness have been washed out of them. The materials seem to have been transubstantiated as they were woven into these forms.

Weaver Patricia Lechman breaks down the basket form. Her piece in this show is no longer a vessel. The base is a small cone of woven coils, like the indentation at the bottom of a wine bottle. To this are affixed two more or less rectangular pieces. If you folded them around, they would probably line up with each other, and you could sew them together to form a proper basket. Instead, Lechman has turned the vessel into an object of contemplation. The two panels are almost the reverse image of each other in color scheme, but each has different patterns in its detail. The inside of the panel, which is most visible, is a well-defined weave. On the reverse side of these panels, strings of the yarn dangle, leaving an amorphous surface. On one of the inside panels, there is a line of color squares reminiscent of the color sequence of chakra beads. Lechman’s piece

contains a multitude of parallels of similarity and opposition, and in its small scale establishes a system of tensions and connections.

The final galleries show contemporary artists, and here we find the ceramic sculptures by Jason Briggs and Sylvia Hyman. Briggs creates fantastic, organic-appearing forms built from tightly fitting pieces of clay in different colors and textures. He affixes other elements to the clay, like small metal studs and tiny hairs that could be pubic hairs. His pieces are discomfiting, but also extremely polished in their technique and presentation. It is interesting to see that he is included in the “art” section, not with the crafts. Of course, he is no longer working with pot forms, but then again, Patricia Lechman has also left the vessel form behind. He uses a finer ceramic style, which makes all the more apparent the continuity between Hooks and Counts and the much earlier pots in the show. One difference is that he exercises active control of every detail of these works, unlike the chance elements in these other pieces. Hyman’s trompe l’oeil piece “Crate of Stuff” also uses extremely polished technique, in this case to create the illusion of a wood crate containing paper and books.

In Briggs’ and Hyman’s work, we can see the vessels in this show make a transition from filling a function to becoming objects for contemplation. The path they take follows natural tendencies in the media, and the contemporary artists pick up elements in the older work that you might not even notice. By the time the exhibit gets to artists like Briggs and Hyman, the material (clay) no longer separates their efforts from conventional fine art. It suggests that we may be heading toward a point when we erase the distinction between crafts and fine art, or to a split within crafts between functional work and “pure art” works.

A show like this one puts old and new works into conversation, and that teaches us more about how to see both. The “crafts” here reveal connections between the past and the present, in part because more attention falls on the materials themselves. By comparison, there is a noticeable lack of connection between most of the works in the contemporary and modern galleries and the art of Tennessee’s past. In painting particularly, we focus more on the image than the material. The lack of connection may also be a function of mobility: Artists who do not come from Tennessee would have no great reason to draw on in-state sources. Finally, the lack of depth in the history of local painting makes it a less fruitful source of inspiration than crafts, where local traditions are comparatively stronger.

One of the hopes for an ambitious show, and this is an ambitious show, is that it will form a watershed—like the New York Armory Show of 1913—which inspires artists to pursue new directions and teaches those of us in the audience to see art differently. It will be interesting to see whether the juxtaposition here of historical and contemporary work gives contemporary artists any new ideas about avenues to pursue, and about what it means to be an artist of Tennessee. John Wood Dodge’s portrait of Mary Eliza Washington forms an emotional center for the “old” portion of the show. It is sentimental, yes, but honest in showing the girl’s illness, and acutely attuned to the difficulty of life at the time. Works like these can echo in contemporary works in many ways, some of them easy to spot, others requiring more thought from the artist and viewer.