

# Spanning the Globe, and Melding Cultures

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

The Olympics of contemporary art is happening this summer as nations around the world send artists to represent them at the [Venice Biennale](#). But work that has a biennial flavor — in other words, it addresses a global audience, but with a local accent — can be seen closer to home in two shows at the [Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art](#) in Hartford: “Shaun Gladwell: Matrix 162” and “Connections Gallery: Iona Rozeal Brown.” One of the artists is even biennial-certified: Mr. [Gladwell](#), along with three others, represented Australia at the 2009 Venice Biennale.

The Olympics is a particularly apt analogy for Mr. Gladwell, because his work is couched in sports — although he leans toward the extreme rather than the I.O.C.-approved. Raised on a steady diet of skateboarding, surfing and other athletic subcultures, Mr. Gladwell has channeled these pursuits into videos that also nod heavily to art history.

The centerpiece of the show, “Interceptor Surf Sequence” from 2009, is a video projected on both sides of a screen suspended from the ceiling. A car seen from behind drives through the Australian outback, an arid and richly colored landscape that resembles the American West. Suddenly, a helmeted figure emerges from the driver’s side window, crawls on top of the car and stands on the hood, merging, in a sense, with the landscape.

The figure is Mr. Gladwell, drawing on his surfing background, but also alluding to pop cultural characters like Mel Gibson’s in the postapocalyptic “Mad Max” trilogy, which was filmed in the Australian outback. (An American version of the original 1979 film dubbed over the Aussie accents.)

In addition to highlighting the vagaries of global and local popular culture, “Interceptor” draws on the tradition of 19th-century landscape painting, particularly German Romantics like [Caspar David Friedrich](#) and the [Hudson River School](#). Standing before a sublime landscape — at one point, a lightning storm rages in the distance — and captured from behind, Mr. Gladwell echoes Friedrich’s humans standing before dramatic landscapes, which served as surrogates for the viewers of his paintings. The local American art spin has

not gone unnoticed by the curators, who mention the Hudson River School in the brochure for Mr. Gladwell's show and link his work to the Wadsworth's collection of American landscape painting.

The video Mr. Gladwell exhibited in Venice is here, too. It features the artist once again cruising through the Australian outback, only this time on a motorcycle, stopping to minister a kind of last rite to kangaroos hit and left as road kill. "Apologies 1 - 6" from 2007 to 2009 is the second in a series titled "MADDESTMAXIMVS," again citing the "Mad Max" movies. But even in this distinctly Australian setting, with Mr. Gladwell dressed like a postmodern shaman in a black motorcycle helmet, jacket and jeans, there are echoes of well-known performance artworks like [Joseph Beuys's](#) "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare" from 1965. Mr. Beuys's work used an animal emblematic of old Europe; Mr. Gladwell's tender ritual is bestowed upon Australia's signature marsupial, run down by modern machines.

Other videos find Mr. Gladwell surfing underwater — that is, suspended under a surfboard in a kind of [Bill Viola](#) netherworld in "Pacific Undertow Sequence (Bondi)" from 2010 — or skateboarding through a city, as in "Yokohama Linework" from 2005. These are pleasing videos, but Mr. Gladwell clearly hit the mark by combining the Mad Max phenomenon with the bombastic sublime of 19th-century landscape painting.

Iona Rozeal Brown takes the idea of combining disparate cultural products and ratchets it up a level — to the mash-up. The term comes from pop music, in which prerecorded songs are mixed together so that they're still recognizable, but altered enough to evade copyright infringement. Ms. Brown's ingredients are 19th-century Japanese woodblock prints and hip-hop — appropriate, since Danger Mouse's "Grey Album" (2004) combined Jay-Z's "Black Album" and the Beatles's "White Album" in a seminal, prototypical mash-up. (In a short video accompanying the show, Ms. Brown also cites the Japanese "ganguro" subculture in which teenagers blacken their faces and bleach their hair, emulating American hip-hop performers and fans.)

Ms. Brown's mash-up of high and low, old and new, East and West, and music and visual culture is evident in two prints from her "a3 (afro-asiatic allegory)" series: "a3 blackface #69" and "a3 blackface #70," both from 2004, transform traditional Edo period Japanese figures by depicting them with oversize Afros and blackened faces. In the video, Ms. Brown — herself a fabulous fashion confection, with a Mohawk hairstyle and a sweater-type garment wrapped around her like a snake — makes a connection between the urban pleasure districts of 18th-century Japan and the American rap and hip-hop culture of late-20th-century American rap.

The only drawback — although part of the point in the Connections gallery — is that Ms. Brown's prints, while clever and astute, are hung alongside woodblock prints by two renowned 18th-century Japanese artists, Kitagawa Utamaro and Ippitsusai Buncho. Seeing her mash-ups next to the masters, it's hard not to notice how the older depictions of geishas and theater actors are a tour de force of subtlety and precision, while Ms. Brown's use blunt, brutish color and supersize proportions to make their point. Utamaro's elegant "The Courtesan Wakatsuru With Another Woman" from around 1790, or Buncho's "The Actors Monnosuké II and Kinsaku II in a Scene From a Drama" from 1779 are potent reminders of why ukiyo-e prints had such an impact on French painters in the 19th century — and continue to do so today.

To be fair, the ukiyo-e artists were dealing with a smaller world, since Japan was closed off to foreigners until the 1850s. What Mr. Gladwell and Ms. Brown are attempting is much harder, in some respects: maneuvering between popular culture and art; turning youthful pursuits and subcultures into quasi-timeless objects that speak to audiences from Sydney to Venice to Hartford. With such an Olympian task at hand, you may wonder how they can even begin. But it also raises the question of whether artists like Mr. Gladwell and Ms. Brown are making objects that, like those by Friedrich or Utamaro, will inspire artists 200 years hence.

*"Shaun Gladwell: Matrix 162," through Sept. 18, and "Connections Gallery: Iona Rozeal Brown," through Sept. 25, at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 600 Main Street, Hartford.  
Information: [wadsworthatheneum.org](http://wadsworthatheneum.org) or (860) 278-2670.*