



Signs of the Times

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Bringing together the visions of nine graduating MFA artists into a self-titled exhibition can seem like herding cats—and maybe monkeys. Are there real points of aesthetic consensus? Who knows what the brainstorming meetings were like for the Mills MFA class of 2016, but they arrived at an incisively contemporary solution to the dilemma of naming their museum presentation: Emoji. They've employed a flexible parlance of texting symbols, a language with enough room to accommodate the diverse artistic identities that they've honed over the last two years.

Translated from that visual language, with the aid of an emoji dictionary, their show sounds curiously like a poem:

*Tears of joy.
Smiling cat face with heart shaped eyes.
See no evil monkey.*

Perhaps it *is* a poem. The artists who came up with this were primed in the course of their MFA studies to know it's the little details that can have big meaning. Their strategy speaks of their cultural moment, a two-year window in which the politics of the world, the school and their studio reflected numerous challenges, shifts and improvements; various joys and pratfalls. Heck, this was even the year that Facebook added a range of symbols to take us beyond a simple thumbs-up.

Which is why it's so brilliant that this group of artists found a way to allow some room for interpretation and healthy emotional ambivalence in their emoji trio. Let's unpack it. 'Tears of joy' is a powerful emotional

sentiment rendered in a cartoonish grin, and it seems a good way to express the thrill of completing something important. It becomes even more interesting when you know that the symbol was selected as 2015's Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries as it "best reflected the ethos, mood and preoccupations" of the moment.

That character is balanced out by a lovestruck cartoon kitty with those adoring red eyes. That face is a poster child for the irresistible cuteness of feline videos on YouTube. The see no evil monkey, though, is the linchpin. The character, with its rounded edges, seems to smile, as if expecting a game of hide and seek, though its classic meaning is a little less benign. The grads question what we choose to look at and how deeply.

At the core of the Mills MFA program is a sense of paying close attention (and at times I'm sure they might think their faculty were looking *too* closely). This group floats the monkey icon ironically, as their work is invariably driven by a knowingness and awareness of cultural conditions. They feel, think and create with sensitivity, referring to issues that are close to their core interests.

Signs and symbols are addressed in Leila Weefur's video installations that poetically interrogate the elemental foundations and language of color as it relates to personal identity, the boxes we're placed in. The use of text to keep society humming along, however inefficiently, is expressed in Elizabeth Bennett's astute subversions of official parking signs and the hand-scrawled cardboard pleas of street corner homeless. Jingwei Qiu's minimalist sculpture, painting, and photographs track global economies and the leveling effects of digital media and other forms of 'progress'.

In works by Holden Shultz, the inherent sadness of technological obsolescence is rerouted—he tinkers with outmoded scanners and imaging devices to create otherworldly photographs that translate human and natural motion into luminous, off kilter color. Nico Harriman channels the mundane nature of the day job—in his case, a clerk at an art supply store—into extravagant panoramas of possibility, along with the reality that

it takes actual labor to make art and to make a living. Alexandra Bailliere merges painting and sculpture in an act of recording, with aesthetic sophistication, the imprint of ordinary actions, the physical and emotional residue that build up in our every day lives. Inspired partly by biological patterns and painterly tropes, Joel Frank creates large-scale painting and varied sculptural forms that express the tensions between the natural and artificial.

There's something metaphysical to Eryka Fiedler's complex abstract paintings, works that channel with resonant color and pattern, the structure of memory palaces, and the poetry of deeply observed daily life. Jacqueline Sherlock Norheim's work, luminous mergers of painting, photography and sculpture, ushers her viewers into uncanny collisions of nature and culture.

These nine artists wisely address political issues with a kind of levity and aesthetic sophistication; they manage to reclaim something that our culture has forgotten or overlooked, and they each create works that speak a language that's wonderfully open to interpretation.