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Rust's 'Tints That Glow' exhibit examines the feminine persona

By **Ron Schira**

Reading Eagle correspondent

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Berks County, PA - Like a seesaw between the signifier and the signified, the artworks of Charlotte, N.C., artist Caroline Rust place paintings and objects together in relational proximity for an examination of what she considers attributes of the feminine persona.

The objects are used solely by women, not only for the sake of appearance, but for those of identity and the female sense of self.

The exhibit, titled "The Tints That Glow," is viewing through July 22 on the theater side of the GoggleWorks Cohen Gallery, with a reception for the artist being held on July 6 at 5:30 p.m.

Rust received her bachelor of fine arts degree from East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C., and a master of fine arts from Winthrop University in South Carolina. She is also a member of the National Association of Women Artists in New York City.

Most of the artworks displayed are in a row of small personal items that sit openly on a shelf with a corresponding painting hung directly above them. All of the objects share a historical precedent specific to women, with a short explanation posted next to the label. Referring to them as integrated media, Rust bounces one part of the artwork against the other to elucidate her point.

For example, she makes direct references to fashion designer Coco Chanel as a backbone of feminine couture and in another to the genteel 1860s photography of Lady Clementina Hawarden. For the latter, a piece titled "Reflections through Powder Dust" portrays a series of monochromatic gray images of casually painted women in period dress. Beneath each picture is a small shelf supporting a vintage compact. The compacts offer, in her words, "a study of the distorted reflections we often have of ourselves."

This theme of identification by object association is repeated throughout the exhibit. One artwork utilizes keyed padlocks in regards to a woman's hair, and another denotes shoes for the stages of a woman's life. A pair of leather gloves in one piece defers to the death of Princess Diana and the need for women to protect themselves.

"Perfect Yet" displays three paintings of Cadmium red lips with a variety of lipsticks on the shelves. This work was inspired by childhood memories of the artist playing with her grandmother's lipstick, while suggesting, albeit covertly, how important cosmetics become later as an adult.

Having grown up in the 1970s, the artist looks to women of the past for inspiration and holds them in high regard. She is additionally familiar with the women's rights movement and appreciates a challenge in the pursuit of knowledge but equally enjoys dressing up and adorning herself with makeup, denying neither beauty nor knowledge.

It would seem, however, that the exhibit offers mixed impressions on what is an acceptable female descriptor and bases its argument entirely on Western society, foregoing the feminine attributes of other cultures and what they associate with being feminine. Maybe that ambiguity is what she's after, but unanswered questions are raised regarding inner and outer beauty and exactly how any material object can truly define femininity.

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Courtesy of Ron Schira

"Locks of Locks" by Caroline Rust.