

Rowan University Art Gallery offers chance to experience virtual and augmented reality

By Vincent Jackson



GLASSBORO — The Rowan University Art Gallery offers a couple of reasons why people should make an appointment during a pandemic to see its newest exhibition, “The Bacchanalian Ones” by Federico Solmi, in person.

The exhibition provides a rare opportunity in South Jersey to see art enhanced by augmented and virtual reality.

The show, which runs through Jan. 16, also is the first solo exhibition of the Italian native’s work in South Jersey. Solmi, 47, is an important and established artist, said Mary Salvante, director of the Rowan gallery and curator of the exhibition.

“This is an artist that you only otherwise see in New York City or Los Angeles or Milan, Italy, or Germany, which are some of the other cities and countries where his work has been shown,” Salvante said.

Nine of Solmi’s pieces are featured in the exhibit.

All of the art is united by Solmi's use of bright colors and the ghoulish aura he lends to both his human and animal characters by having their teeth sharpened as if they are ready to devour the viewer at any second.

The most elaborate piece is titled "The Dreadful Ones," from 2017, which has been augmented with virtual reality for its Rowan showing. The viewer puts on a 3D-printed mask that was hand-painted by Solmi. At the back of the mask, where the eyes are, is a virtual reality headset.

"When viewing the VR with the mask on, you are essentially embodying the spirit of that character, and you become part of this elaborate theatrical performance that the artist has created and envisioned," Salvante said.

Once the mask and the VR headset are secure on the viewer's face, museum visitors will feel as if they are riding along with President Donald J. Trump, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee and Italian dictator Roberto Mussolini, waving to adoring crowds and smoking cigars.

Those experiencing "The Dreadful Ones" will see a presidential portrait and then enter a ballroom where each leader will dance on the presidential seal before the loop ends.

Shreekanth Mandayam, Rowan's professor of electrical and computer engineering, consulted on the technical needs of the exhibit. His team refined the VR mask design and printed them.

The process of designing the masks to accommodate a VR headset meant back-and-forth communication among Mandayam's team, the VR laboratory, Solmi and his studio, Mandayam said.

"I thought it was very inventive and imaginative," said Mandayam about Solmi's exhibit.

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of Solmi's work, it is hard to figure how it is created just by looking at it.

"The Bathhouse" is brand new for this exhibition. It started off as paintings, but the paintings have been manipulated by computer software. Some of the figures in the close to 10-minute video were created through motion capture, the same technique actor Andy Serkis used to create the Gollum character in 2001's "The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring."

"The Bathhouse" is viewed through five LED screens that are placed in a frame that is 6 feet high and 20 feet wide.

Solmi's work first captured Salvante's attention two years ago at the Armory in New York City. She was impressed by the quality of his animation and his artistry in his approach to video.

When she decided to focus on the theme of technology and the arts for the gallery this year, that's when she realized Solmi would be perfect for Rowan.

Solmi has several museum solo exhibitions scheduled for next year, including at the Block Museum of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and the Tucson Museum of Art in Arizona.

“He hides the technology, so you are not distracted by the gizmo,” Salvante said. “I like the idea that he is taking you on a journey from historical technology to the new technology and using the idea of painting, which you can say is historical technology, and translating it into a virtual format.”

Solmi is a satirist, Salvante said. He pokes fun at historical figures and plays with the idea of them being idolized, she said. The zombified way the historical figures are rendered, with their wide-eyed stares, will strike some as cartoonish, while other people will find the same work unsettling.

“We are an educational institution. We all have a mission to instill in students notions of questioning authority, investigating information to come to your own decision and to come to your own conclusion about what you believe,” Salvante said. “The university art gallery is an extension of the classroom.”

PHOTO GALLERY: Federico Solmi exhibit at the Rowan University Art Gallery in Glassboro



'The Bacchanalian Ones'

WHEN: Through Jan. 16

WHERE: Rowan University Art Gallery, 301 High St. W., Glassboro

HOW: The exhibit is free but by appointment only. All visitors must wear a mask and practice social distancing.

TICKETS: [eventbrite.com/e/thebacchanalian-ones-featuring-federico-solmi-tickets-127377317987](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/thebacchanalian-ones-featuring-federico-solmi-tickets-127377317987)

https://pressofatlanticcity.com/news/local/rowan-university-art-gallery-offers-chance-to-experience-virtual-and-augmented-reality-art/article_0cc9ac91-6cef-580e-8961-3ead2f0111ac.html#tracking-source=home-top-story