

# WHITING TENNIS

## My Side of the Mountain

Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University

January 18 – March 23, 2014

### Teachers Guide

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *Whiting Tennis: My Side of the Mountain* and offer ideas for leading self-guided groups through the galleries. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials and lessons.

#### Goals

- To introduce students to the work of Whiting Tennis
- To identify characteristics of the artist's style
- To examine the variety of materials, techniques, and processes used by the artist
- To explore themes and motifs in the artist's work
- To explore the role of the viewer in understanding and interpreting a work of art

#### Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Discuss how the artist uses the parts of art and principles of art in his work.
- Discuss the artist's use of real and faux surfaces to create visual and perceptual tension.
- Discuss the expressive qualities of the work and how the artist achieves them through his choice of material, his techniques, and his processes.
- Discuss their understanding and interpretation of the artist's work and how they are influenced by their own perceptions and experiences.

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## INTRODUCTION:

By Jonathan Bucci, Collection Curator, Hallie Ford Museum of Art

Whiting Tennis merges interests in folk and **Pop** art with **Surrealism** and postwar painting to create a world of his own with a distinctly American narrative. He evokes the beauty, humor, and melancholy of everyday life through landscapes, lonely forms, and dilapidated structures. Derelict buildings found on city side-streets and country back roads, solitary animals and worn-out signs are all infused with empathy and personality to tell a story that is very familiar to the Northwest, yet universally American.

Born in Hampton, Virginia in 1959, Tennis lives and works in Seattle, Washington where he spent part of his childhood and attended the University of Washington, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1984. He has lived in Seattle on and off throughout his life and settled there most recently in 2004 after living in New York City for fourteen years. This exhibition, his first solo museum show on the West Coast, examines the sculptures, paintings, collages, and drawings created by Tennis during the past ten years.

Using images and objects that suggest discarded or used-up buildings and animals and humans, his work reflects a vision of contemporary America as a place where lonely, awkward figures roam a world of timeworn buildings and where the overlooked is beautiful. The characters that populate Tennis's artworks are not direct likenesses but are abstracted and pared down forms created from repurposed plywood or collaged from hand-cut wood-grain prints, all exuding a sort of roughshod **Cubism**. His art includes imagery that is zoomorphic (taking on animal attributes) and anthropomorphic (taking on human attributes). Buildings in a variety of forms are also a prominent subject matter, including structures that may be either invented or specific.

A number of his paintings and sculptures incorporate faux painting and *trompe l'oeil* techniques. These artworks appear to be genuine found objects, but they are actually fabricated, thus blurring the lines between reality and illusion, and creating a tension between representation and abstraction.

Taken together, the works in this exhibition provide a unique opportunity to appreciate the depth of Tennis's vision. It shows us that beauty can be found in the commonplace, and depicts a world where the new and obvious are overlooked, and the past, in all its rough and ragged forms, tells the true story.

## BEFORE THE MUSEUM VISIT:

### Looking at the work of Whiting Tennis

*I like trying to jumble together the literal world with the abstract world with the animated world and see how they sit together. You can place something totally abstract, with no personality, right next to something that's like a teddy bear, and see something new in both of them.*

Whiting Tennis



#### ***Study for Blue Hamburger***

2007

Acrylic and collage on canvas

24" x 36"

Courtesy of the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle Washington

*Study for Blue Hamburger*, one of Tennis's depictions of weathered, tumbled down or jerry-rigged structures, illustrates how the artist "jumble[s] together the literal world with the abstract world". At first it may seem like an abstract composition of collaged forms, colors, and patterns. Then we recognize it as a building-like structure – perhaps a small house -- cobbled together from hand-printed sheets of paper that simulate plywood or lattice work, and painted areas of blue and white-wash that look like tarps and plastic sheeting.

#### **What do you see in *Study for Blue Hamburger*?**

- Briefly describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter, setting, mood, atmosphere, etc.
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way a work is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
- After studying the details, discuss how the artist has used a variety of media and techniques.
- Describe again what you see here. Have your impressions of subject matter, mood, setting and atmosphere changed after spending more time with the work?

## Suggested Discussion

- Describe the setting where you might find the structure (house) in *Study for Blue Hamburger*. Where is it located? Who lives there? How was it built?
- Tennis often titles his works after they are completed, based on associations and relationships he sees in the finished painting or sculpture. Discuss the title, *Blue Hamburger*. Would you give it another title? Explain.
- Tennis creates faux surfaces in *Study for Blue Hamburger* by collaging sheets of paper hand printed from a carved wood block, creating a play between illusion and reality. Why do you think the artist chose this layered process rather than just painting the grain surface on the canvas? (added visual interest; acknowledging, even emphasizing, art as artifice even when it looks real; emphasizing artistic process as part of the work, etc.).



### *Eeyore Head*

2008

Cast plaster, paint

25" x 9" x 7.5"

Courtesy of the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle Washington

*Eeyore Head* illustrates how the artist “jumble[s] together the literal world with the abstract world with the animated world”. At first it appears to be part of an architectural structure or perhaps an abstract modernist sculpture composed of lines, forms, and pattern. When we hear the title, the work is “animated” and we suddenly see the woeful donkey’s features.

### What do you see in *Eeyore Head*?

- Without reading the title of the work, briefly describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter and mood, etc..
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way a work is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
- Give this work a title and explain your choice.
- After learning the artist’s title for the work, *Eeyore Head*, describe again what you see here. Have your impressions of subject matter and mood changed after spending more time with the work?

- After studying the details and without reading the label, describe the materials the artist has used. Can you tell this is cast plaster and paint rather than real wood? Does it affect your experience of the work?

### Suggested Discussion:

- Discuss Whiting Tennis's quote as it relates to both *Eeyore Head* and *Study for Blue Hamburger*:

***I like trying to jumble together the literal world with the abstract world with the animated world and see how they sit together. You can place something totally abstract, with no personality, right next to something that's like a teddy bear, and see something new in both of them.***

- Discuss zoomorphism as it relates to *Eeyore Head*. Introduce the concept of pareidolia (the phenomenon of perception that causes people to see a face in the moon, an animal in the clouds, or landscapes in stains on a wall).
- Compare the use of faux materials in *Eeyore Head* to that in *Study for Blue Hamburger*. How is it the same? How is it different? Is the effect the use of faux materials has on your experience of the work the same in each piece? Do you think the artist had the same reasons for choosing these materials in each piece?
  - The use of trompe l'oeil techniques and objects can be found throughout the history of art. Look for other examples of artists who use the play, even tension, between illusion and reality. Some works, like American painter William Harnett's late-19<sup>th</sup>-century trompe l'oeil still life paintings (<http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/features/slideshows/william-harnett.html#>) were created to delight the viewer with their verisimilitude, while others like Surrealist Rene Magritte's early-20<sup>th</sup>-century *The Treachery of Images* (<http://collections.lacma.org/node/239578>), emphasize art as artifice: no matter how realistically or faithfully an object is depicted in a work of art, it is not the real object but a representation of that object. The work of art itself is paint, canvas, etc. Pop artist Andy Warhol's *Brillo Soap Pad Box* sculptures of the mid-1960s (<http://www.warhol.org/ArtCollections.aspx?id=1708>) further blurred the distinction of representation and reality, as well as high (e.g. the fine arts of painting and sculpture) and low (popular, consumer) culture, and raised questions about what constitutes a work of art. Which do you think best describes Whiting Tennis's work? Explain.
- Watch and discuss this brief interview with Whiting Tennis as it relates to *Study for Blue Hamburger* and *Eeyore Head*. Revisit the interview after your visit to the museum. [http://willamette.edu/arts/hfma/exhibitions/library/2013-14/whiting\\_tennis\\_gallery/whiting\\_tennis\\_interview.html](http://willamette.edu/arts/hfma/exhibitions/library/2013-14/whiting_tennis_gallery/whiting_tennis_interview.html)

## **Suggested Activities:**

- Find objects in the classroom, outdoors, or at home that are zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, or illustrate the phenomenon of pareidolia. Write a short description about what you see.
- Create a structure and/or landscape using paint, pencils and collaged pictures from magazines, collaged texture rubbings taken from various surfaces found in the classroom or playground, and/or real materials like colored plastic or plywood sheets, etc. Think about how to create a balanced composition using pattern, color, form, etc. Share the decisions and choices you made.

## **AT THE MUSEUM:**

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Be selective – don't try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.
- Focus on the works of art. Encourage students to look closely at each work of art and consider starting their exploration with the same “what do you see?” strategies they used with *Study for Blue Hamburger* and *Eeyore Head*.
  - Without reading the title of the work, briefly describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter, setting, mood and atmosphere.
  - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way a work is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?

## **Things to look for in the exhibition:**

**The play between representation and reality** in pieces like *Blue Tarp*, where the surface is built up to mimic the textured weave of a tarp; in the real vs. implied textures of *Tower* and *Cottage* and the use of hand-printed and plaster-cast wood grain as well as the real thing; or the visual tension between collaged surfaces and painted backgrounds.

Sculptures like *Washer and Dryer* present near-faithful reproductions of common everyday objects, stripped of their utility and presented in a context that invites the viewer to consider the aesthetics— line, shape, form, etc. – as well as the cultural and psychological implications.

**Studies, sketches, and models.** These works, some unfinished, others smaller versions of larger sculptures, called *maquettes*, offer insight into the exploration, experimentation, and decision-making involved in creating a body of work. In pieces like *Index* and *Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda*, artistic process becomes the theme of the work itself.

**Anthropomorphism and zoomorphism.** Many of the forms and figures in Tennis's work have qualities or attributes that suggest humans or animals. These characters are often developed from the artist's doodles and automatic drawing (drawing unconsciously or by free association) so there is an aspect of pareidolia in his work, the phenomenon of perception that causes people to see a face in the moon or an animal in the clouds. Recent works, like *Skipper*, appear to originate from figure sketches created during the life-drawing classes Tennis began to attend in 2011.

**The play between humor and sadness** in the solitary figures that populate Tennis's work. Whimsical, yet often ungainly and made from discarded, well-used or rough-hewn materials, the artist has likened some of these characters to isolated outsiders like Frankenstein's monster, creatures who just want to make friends and can't understand why everyone is running away from them.

**The old, the well-used, the discarded.** Tennis's work recognizes the beauty found in the thrown-away, the ignored, or the overlooked. There is a quality of jerry-rigging, making use of what you have, and creating something new out of the old and unvalued.

**Boyhood nostalgia.** Much of Tennis's sculpture evokes makeshift shelters or clubhouses from a rough and tumble boyhood, made of whatever was at hand in the basement workshop or found in the woods or in junk piles. The title of the exhibition, *My Side of the Mountain*, is a reference to the 1959 young-adult novel of the same name by Jean Craighead George, a book the artist read as a boy. It tells the story of Sam Gibley, a young teen who runs away from his home in the city to live for a year in a burnt-out tree in the woods, existing in splendid isolation and occasional loneliness, making use of what he could find off the land or in an old abandoned homestead nearby, observing and exploring nature (especially animals – he tames a wild falcon), and above all persevering.

## RESOURCES:

<http://www.gregkucera.com/tennis.htm>

Barry, Ian, *Opener 22: Whiting Tennis*. The Francis Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, 2012



## **VOCABULARY:**

**Cubism** artistic style that developed in the early 20th century and emphasizes the representation of natural forms as geometric shapes seen from several angles.

**Pop art** a style of modern art in the 1960s that used the imagery of mass-media, mass-production, and mass-culture.

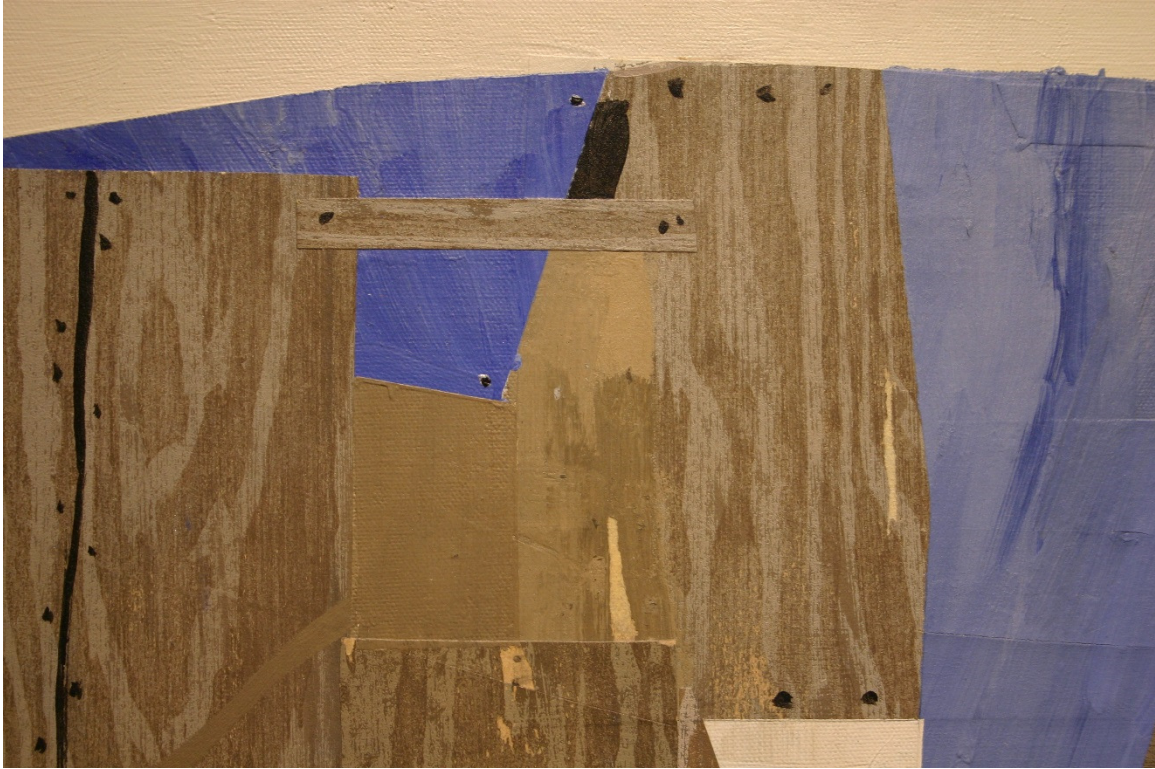
**Surrealism** a 20th-century literary and artistic movement that attempts to express the workings of the subconscious and is characterized by fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtaposition of subject matter.

***trompe l'oeil*** French for “fool the eye”, a style of painting or other representation in which the depicted object is meant to deceive the viewer into believing it is the object itself.





(details)



(details)



(detail)







(detail)





Walt Disney's *Eeyore*