

Art History Research Culminates in Psychedelic Poster Exhibition by Nessa Kerr



Scott Montgomery, associate professor in the School of Art and Art History, curated a recent psychedelic poster art exhibition in the Vicki Myhren Gallery, *Visual Trips: The Psychedelic Movement in San Francisco*. The exhibition consisted of over two hundred posters, original drawings, photographs, mechanical drawings and acetate sheets by the artists who defined the visual component of the psychedelic scene from 1965 to 1971.

Montgomery has been at DU since 2003 and has seen the psychedelic posters as artwork for nearly as long. The idea to launch an exhibition based on research backing up the posters' artistic merit began about six years ago when Montgomery started building relationships with the artists, many of whom are still living. One of his goals for the research has been to give the artists the credit they deserve during their lifetime.

"The artists need to see this and see the art world catch up with them," said Montgomery.

As his research developed and psychedelic poster art gained credibility, Montgomery found, "it is really gratifying to have people seeing the artistry of the posters. The show at the Denver Art Museum opened psychedelic posters up to a huge audience and made the point that these works belong in a museum. Now, through our own exhibition, we have a chance to articulate why."

Developing the research was just the first step towards the exhibition. Montgomery also worked on relationships with key lenders and negotiated with Dan Jacobs, director of the Vicki Myhren Gallery, about gallery space and a timeline for the exhibition. After years of anticipation, everything came together in what Montgomery described as a "perfect storm of connection," in December 2013 when a loan of around 850 objects was received at Hampden Art Study Center.

In the months that followed, Montgomery worked closely with Dan Jacobs and Sabena Kull, the collections manager at the Vicki Myhren Gallery, to select the works that would appear in the exhibition and design a layout and overall vision for the show. Although much of the exhibition was a result of careful planning, many of the final details were conceived during the install and Montgomery tapped his personal collection to fill in important gaps.

"Several times I just ran home to get a poster – we even pulled a couple off our wall at home," Montgomery said, "After this experience I will look at exhibitions completely differently."

During the weeks after the opening, the exhibition received throngs of visitors and had overwhelmingly positive reviews by several major Denver news outlets. Montgomery saw the response as more than fulfilling his goals for the exhibition.

"People respond to the work but don't know what to do with it. Seeing visitors reading the exhibition text proved that we can use the images to engage them in the history of the art movement and the richness of artistic production that is at work here," he said.

Although some might find it strange to see a professor of Medieval and Renaissance Art History so deeply immersed in the 20th century, there are actually many similarities between how the art from vastly different times is interpreted.

“I analyze aspects such as iconography, ritual performance, programmatic narrative, style as the bearer of meaning, and cultural identity for works from both time periods, so the skills needed for interpretation are actually remarkably similar,” Montgomery said.

Not surprisingly, many of Montgomery’s students were drawn to the exhibition.

“I particularly like watching them bring their friends back. We had lots of repeat visits across a broad range of visitors. Some came back four or five times,” he said.

Montgomery spent time in the gallery interacting with students and other visitors and felt such a positive response that he is now planning a graduate seminar to help foster original student research on the topic.

“With the collection available at Hampden Art Study Center, students will have direct access to archival sources and have an opportunity to conduct interviews, get the chance to hone research tactics needed for the study of art history, and make a true contribution to the field,” said Montgomery, “It’s an opportunity that they don’t always get at this point in their career.”

Through his success in promoting psychedelic posters as worthy of artistic merit, Montgomery has proved his own advice to his students to be true.

“If you think something is important,” he said, “it’s worth investigating, even if others don’t think so. Psychedelic posters have not traditionally been important to our discipline, but I think they will be.”