

Labor of Love: Family connection fueled art exhibition at Hamilton College museum

STEVE HOWE | Observer-Dispatch

The first impression of Yashua Klos' artwork is one of scale.

Upon entering Klos' exhibition, "Our Labour," at Hamilton College's Wellin Museum of Art through June 12, the namesake piece dominates the space.

An homage to Diego Rivera's "Detroit Industry Murals," "Our Labour" soars to the ceiling and spans 38 feet across.



Installation views of the exhibition "Yashua Klos: Our Labour" (February 12 – June 12, 2022) at the Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College.

PROVIDED PHOTO: JOHN BENTHAM

Unlike Rivera's original work, the people represented in Klos' work are not anonymous figures toiling as cogs of industry. The portraits are all easily

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After more than 40 years, Klos recently connected with his father's family. The experience took him from an only child being raised by his mother to having a huge family overnight.

"I'm really now sort of negotiating what my identity means in this larger context of family," Klos said. "And of course, along with that comes my family's history."

Family history

His grandmother, the central figure in the woodblock print piece, had 15 children. Those children and other relatives appear in "Our Labour," with each portrait a unique woodblock print handmade by Klos.

Rivera's murals accurately depicted auto workers in the 1930s as white and male, Klos said, but it didn't stay that way.

"Of course, the demographic of Detroit changed soon after because of the urban migration and the population multiplied by six, and those were Black folks moving up from the South, families like mine," he said. "So, I felt like I was ... personally sort of missing some visual representation of that part of the history."

Klos' family migrated from Memphis to Detroit in the mid-20th century for jobs in auto plants.



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While diving into the history of his family and Detroit, Klos identified another type of labor: the work required to keep a family together through moving to a new city and facing the trials and tribulations of injustice, racial segregation and more.

“So, all the labor that it takes to keep a family together, right, and still be generous and loving,” he said. “And then on top of that, the sort of labor that they and I were doing in real time in trying to connect and bridge the gap.”

Those connections were built through FaceTime, calls and messages. His brother took his first ever flight to see Klos, who is based out of Brooklyn.

The labor of art

Klos’ method of creating art is labor intensive. Woodblock prints, especially on a large scale, are drawn and carved by hand before being inked.

The technique has history as a grassroots political art-making practice, used by artists like Emory Douglas in Black Panther newspapers and by Elizabeth

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labor that has helped build America,” Klos said. “So at that time it was important to represent Black people as sort of building the country.”

Klos said he wants to acknowledge the movements rooted in those images using wood block printing, but also push the discussion forward.

“So, it’s sort of this tightrope where I want to pay homage, but I also don’t want to uphold assumptions of the Black body as a body for labor,” he said.

Wellin Museum Director Tracy Adler said Klos’ art stood out to her 15 years ago, when he was a graduate student and she was a curator at Hunter College.

“Even then I knew that he was doing something really unique and different in his approach to dealing with the medium of print,” Adler said.

The intersection of labor and self care are common through the works in the “Our Labour” exhibition. Michigan wildflowers are twined through the pieces, while man-made elements like bricks and car parts are intermingled.

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One piece features a Black male hand holding the wildflowers. When the idea came to Klos, he said he couldn't think of many images he'd seen of the subject; a Google search confirmed there were few.

"Even though it's really a very simple gesture, maybe it's kind of an act of intervention, to show that the Black hand just holding flowers and admiring the flowers in that moment," he said. "Not doing work; perhaps in a moment of generosity, perhaps in just a moment of self care and reflection."

"It shouldn't be, but it is kind of a jarring image when you look at it and you realize that the kind of messaging that we've been fed historically and also through the media is not one of self care," Adler said.

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Collaboration

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diagram of a Ford car on the left, with the same prints used to show the assembled car on the right.

The piece prominently features wildflowers and vines, though the assembled car is shown in an interior space with wood floors and art deco wallpaper. Students worked in an assembly line fashion, completing one part of the job before passing it on to the next student.

One of those students, Shelly Cao, also is a docent at the Wellin Museum. While they worked under Klos' direction, he incorporated ideas or designs from the students as it came together, she said.

"I got to feel like the creative part, working as a supporter, but also got to create our own ideas in the piece," Cao said. "So, that's really fun and a really new experience to me."

Moving on

The pieces in "Our Labour" were created specifically for the Wellin Museum exhibition, Adler said, but Hamilton College won't be the only stop for the exhibition.

This fall, Klos' works will be on display at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York City. He's been a fan of the gallery for the 18 years he's lived in the city and has routinely visited the shows there.

"It's almost surreal, you know, because it really represents a kind of a full-circle for me, I think, in my artistic growth," Klos said.

If you go

What: Yashua Klos' "Our Labour" exhibit.




Where: Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art, Hamilton College, 198 College Hill Road, Clinton.

When: Through June 12.

Museum hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Closed Sundays and Mondays and from Saturday, May 28, through Monday, May 30, for Memorial Day.

Details: hamilton.edu/wellin

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