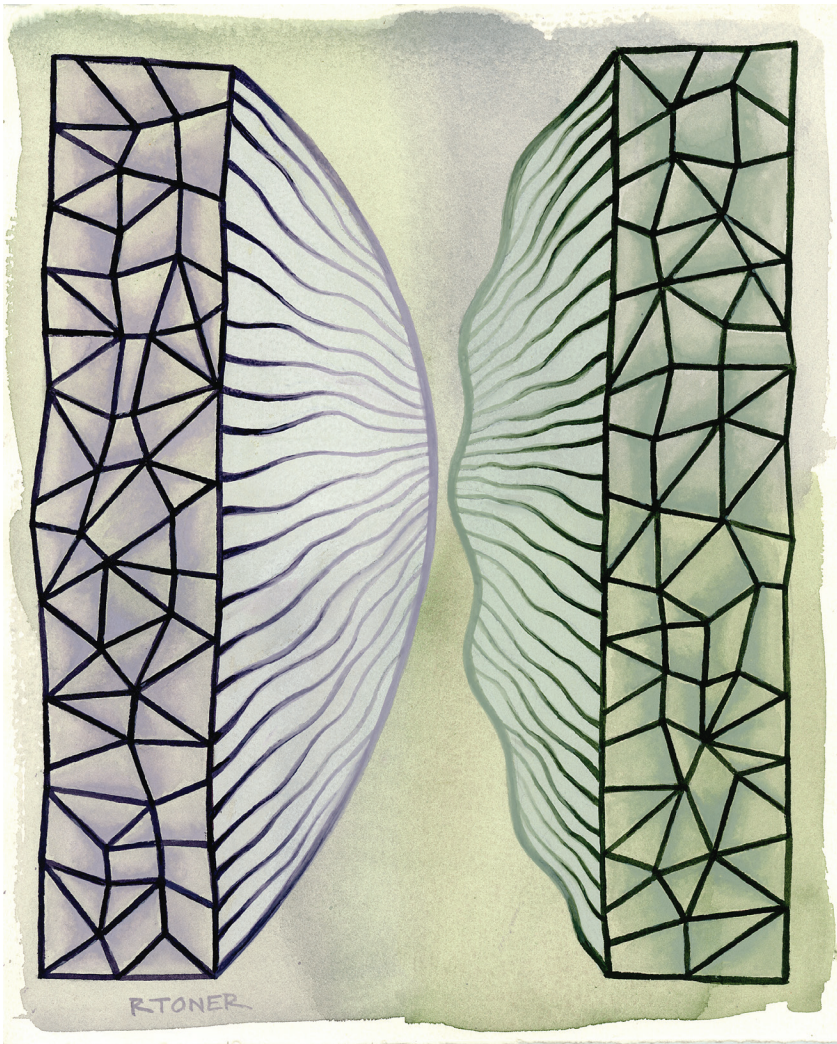




**ROCHELLE
TONER**
Tying a Knot
in a Cherry
Stem



Domit, 2014

ROCHELLE TONER: Tying a Knot in a Cherry Stem

September 14 – November 10, 2018

While Rochelle Toner's work has been included in numerous group exhibitions in the Philadelphia area over the last 40 years, it has not received the critical attention that it merits. Having spent 30 years dedicated to academic service, coupled with the lack of support which women (especially queer women) of her generation received in the art world, much of Toner's extensive body of work remains unexhibited and unknown.

While Toner identifies as a printmaker, her most current works are in other media such as watercolor, collage and drawing. This exhibition focuses primarily on Toner's work from the last decade and includes more than 40 recent works. The show features vibrantly colored watercolors, as well as collages and a selection of the artist's earlier works, including ambitiously-scaled etchings from the 1970s.

To provide deeper insight into Toner's work, several installations of objects and ephemera drawn from her idiosyncratic personal collections are also presented. Ranging from a selection of roughly crafted iron shears to groupings of shells and fossils, these objects illuminate many of the underlying ideas with which Toner is concerned. They reflect an ongoing interest in the simultaneous violence and beauty embodied by tools, the ways that some types of labor lead to objects being imbued with a sense of gender and her unabashed love for the wonders of the natural world.

Toner's expansive practice embodies our interest in the critical role that print plays in contemporary art. As Toner is a former Board member of this organization, it is wonderfully exciting to celebrate her exceptional achievements with this display.

We are very grateful to Rochelle Toner for her generosity and enthusiasm for this project and to curator John Caperton, (The Print Center's Jensen Bryan Curator from 2007 – 2018), for organizing the exhibition. Sincere thanks are also extended to Judith Tannenbaum for her insightful essay on Toner, which was made possible by generous special project support from the Edna W. Andrade Fund of The Philadelphia Foundation.

Rochelle Toner: Layers of Mark and Meaning

Judith Tannenbaum

Tying a Knot in a Cherry Stem, an exhibition of work by Rochelle Toner, is cause for celebration. It is an opportunity to immerse oneself in her watercolor drawings, collages and prints from the past decade and to discover their links to early etchings dating back more than 40 years. *Tying a Knot* also reveals connections between Toner's works on paper and a marvelous array of natural and manmade "stuff" that she has assembled.

An artist of remarkable vision and dedication, Toner creates images infused with sensuality and humor, based on her observations of natural form. Her Northern Liberties (Philadelphia) row house is filled with unexpected things. In her third-floor studio, clusters of objects range from dried seedpods and branches to seashells and fossils. Downstairs, a miscellany of collections includes penny quilts designed and stitched by her Iowan grandmother. These keep company with groupings of useful items, including rusted sheep shears, rug beaters, tea strainers and "travelers" — tools for measuring wagon wheels — as well as nested ceramic bowls, masks and miniature Day of the Dead shrines from Mexico. Her collections reflect the pleasure Toner takes in tangible everyday objects, both antique and contemporary. There are clear links between their aesthetic qualities and images that she creates with her own hands and mind's eye.

In the exhibition, two large, mysterious black and white etchings from the early 1970s display a more narrative bent than more recent works on paper. The rich tonal variations and complex imagery of the two etchings were the result of months of work. In *Contents Under Pressure*, created in 1972 just before Toner moved to Philadelphia to teach at Tyler School of Art, Temple University, a cooking pot filled with mountainous forms sits surrounded by spikes in a confined space. Above the pot, strange, impaled, meat-like elements hang from the ceiling. On either side of the composition, taut wires with ominous turnbuckles appear to hold floor and



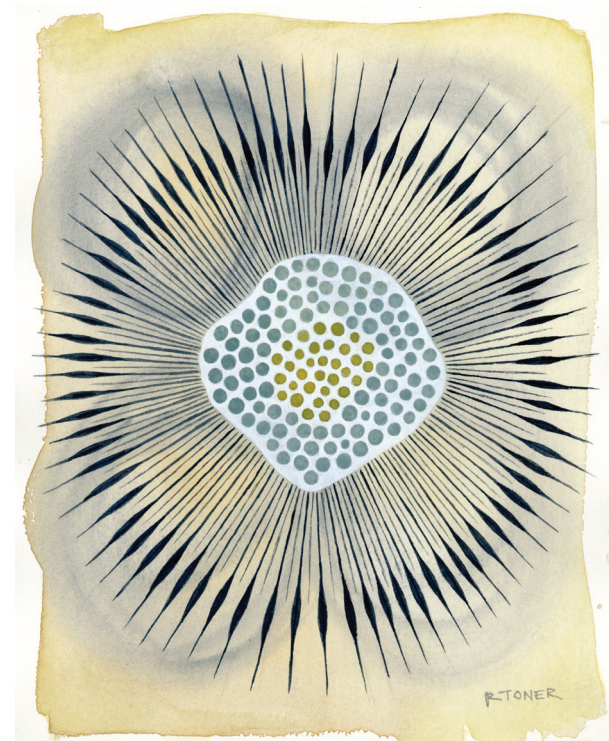
Contents Under Pressure, 1972



Blue Gold, 2016

ceiling together. Below the spikes, another space is populated with imagined fruits and vegetable matter. Variations on these recur in recent prints and watercolors. Ideas about women's domestic roles pervade this disquieting architectural setting, while the implied violence of the image contrasts with feminine stereotypes of nurturing and fecundity.

Toner's consciousness was indeed stimulated by the feminist revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, as she absorbed its themes and theories to understand better her own drives and desires, both personal and professional. She avoids literal meaning in her work but acknowledges that as a gay woman she was thinking about feminism, sexuality and gender politics in her early work, and that female forms continue to have metaphorical significance for her.¹ She enjoys being strong and able to fix things, traits associated with masculinity; she also cherishes the softness of the womanly, female body.



Fan, 2007

A strain can be seen in Toner's improvisational method and the resulting biomorphic images. She often starts her watercolor drawings with doodles that she enlarges and plays with — shifting colors, shapes and lines, as she allows one thing to lead to another. Hints of Jean Arp, Louise Bourgeois, Alexander Calder, Paul Klee, Joan Miró and Georgia O'Keeffe appear, but Toner's preference for symmetry (as demonstrated by compositions featuring a central, circular configuration) and bold contours makes the works distinctly her own.

When Toner became dean at Tyler in 1989, her demanding administrative schedule did not allow time to make prints on a regular basis. Necessity being the mother of invention, she found a way to maintain an active studio practice by shifting from printmaking to drawing and concentrating on watercolors, which are less labor intensive and more portable. She continued to



Black Ovals, 2016

contribute to invitational print portfolios, sometimes including imagery derived from her watercolor drawings in the prints. The wide-ranging palette of Toner's watercolors — subtle washes of color as well as more saturated hues — distinguishes them from her prints and contributes a new vitality and playfulness to her work.

Radiating strokes of color, sometimes resembling feathers or the cilia of cellular forms, express greater immediacy and movement in contrast to the richly toned and textural but monochromatic etchings.

Always intrigued by collage, Toner first tried making them in 2015. After concentrating on watercolors for about 10 years, she wanted to mix things up and try something new. She had made sculpture at several points in her life — first assemblages in boxes, later weighty cast bronze biomorphic forms that resemble components of her semi-abstract etchings. Collage brings two- and three-dimensional modes together — maintaining the flatness of the paper but emphasizing the volumetric nature of cutout shapes and forms. Featuring bold contoured shapes, some of her compositions are loosely geometric, resembling rectilinear frames (for example, *Green Box*, 2015), whereas others suggest eccentric creatures with multiple limbs (*Black Ovals*, 2016). Toner's sources for variegated color, texture and pattern are pages from art and fashion magazines. She has developed an extensive filing system for this material — categorizing and saving pages by color, texture or subject matter — so she can find just the right element for a particular piece.

Toner's first group of collages are more abstract than her current series, which she calls *Playing with Dolls* — suggesting toys and paper cutouts from childhood. But the word “doll” can also be slang for a physically attractive individual and implies intimacy, whether desired or unsolicited. Legs and shoes appear in most of these compositions. Often, multiple sets of legs go in different directions. Diagonal elements add movement, and top and bottom may be reversed. Some of the long-legged figures are clearly feminine but gender becomes ambiguous as Toner plays with feminine and masculine stereotypes. For example, we cannot be sure if we are



#13, 2017

looking at men's shoes, or are they the feet and legs of a woman dressed in men's clothing? In some of these new collages, Toner puts several different body parts together to form the complete image. Surrealist underpinnings of this work range from the life-size dolls by Hans Bellmer, which have been criticized for objectifying and manipulating the female body, to the androgynous self-portrait photographs by Claude Cahun that deal with lesbian and transgender identities.

Another new series of collages is based on antique lithographic book pages that a friend, Robert Flynt, gave to Toner about twelve years ago, because they reminded him of her work. The lithographs, natural science illustrations from the *U.S. Geological Survey of the Territories*, published in 1873 by Thomas Sinclair & Son, a well-

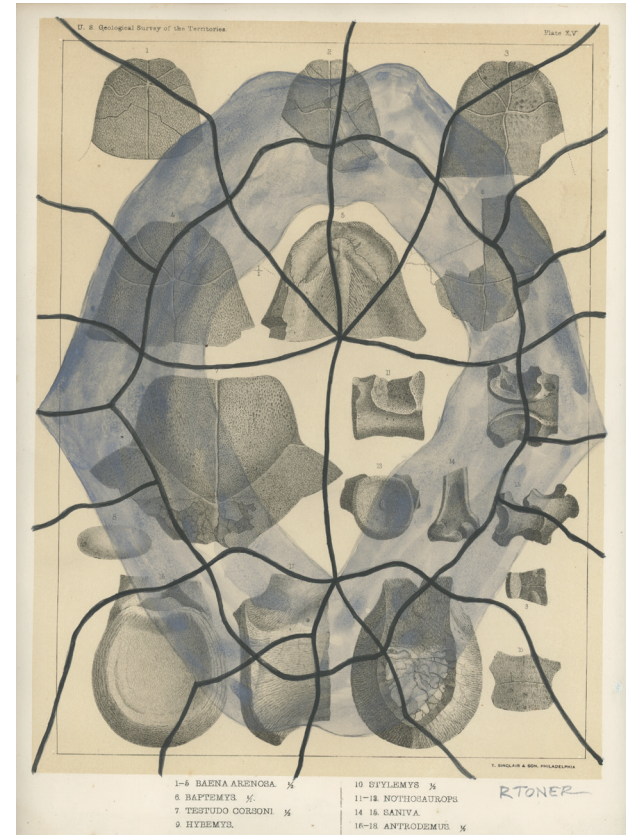


Plate XV, 2018

known lithographer in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, include bones and skeletons of all kinds of animals (from the extinct mastodon to common fish) as well as geological formations. They remained untouched until recently, when Toner figured out how to add something of her own without obliterating the originals. Her ongoing series combines three layers of imagery: the printed illustration overlaid with transparent shapes she has drawn in bluish-gray watercolor topped with open patterns of dark gray lines, some resembling elements in her watercolor drawings. Toner uses Payne's Gray for both the washes and the linear configurations although the results are different.²

It seems equally valid to "read" these collages from the ground up or from the top layer down. When I looked at the new geological



Stack, 2008

collages, first I saw Toner's dark gray top drawing. Then I looked again and saw the watercolor shapes on top of the original illustrations. The dark lines are images in their own right but they also create openings or peepholes through which one sees the layers below. For example, I paid more attention to the lithographic image of a fish skeleton after seeing Toner's abstract pattern. She created her double-layer drawings in response to characteristics she observed in the illustrations, her lines sometimes echoing the original images, sometimes counteracting them.

The geological series exemplifies Toner's ability to balance form and content, representation and abstraction, movement and equilibrium, tension and stillness, the traditional and the new. Biomorphic forms suggesting eggs, webs, leaves and various human elements such

as uvulas and breasts have recurred in Toner's art throughout the decades, but she does not repeat herself. Instead, she continues to find new ways to refresh and reinvent the work. From the black and white prints of the 1970s to the latest collage drawings, abstract patterns, marks and strokes merge, coexist and morph into figurative elements. Her observations of botanical forms and human physiology give way to subconscious associations that pulse with movement and metaphor.

Toner has been strikingly productive over the past decade. Her dedication to her work and her pleasure in creating it show no signs of letting up. In fact, shifting to collage has opened up fertile new territory for her. It is not too big a leap to compare her current exploration of collage to Matisse's concentration on cut-paper collage, a technique he took up after the age of seventy when surgery limited his ability to paint. Matisse had expected to die but lived another fourteen years, and the late, large cutouts stand as one of his greatest achievements. Toner may have less recognition and celebrity than Matisse, but her contribution is nonetheless significant. She will continue to thrive as an artist and the work she produces in her later years seems likely to be revelatory.

¹ Artist statement, July 2018, and author's conversation with the artist during a studio visit, July 27, 2018.

² Twelve of these collage drawings are presented in a book titled *Collage Drawings 1873 - 2018*, published in 2018 by Temple Contemporary (directed by Robert Blackson) coinciding with The Print Center exhibition.

Judith Tannenbaum is a contemporary art curator. From 1986 to 2000, she served as curator, associate director, and interim director at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), University of Pennsylvania. From 2000 to 2013, she was the Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). She is currently artistic director of *Whitman at 200: Art and Democracy*.

Rochelle Toner is an artist and educator based in Philadelphia. She earned a BA at the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls in 1962, received an MA in Art and Art Education in 1967 and an MFA in Painting and Printmaking in 1970, both from the University of Illinois, Urbana. Toner began teaching at Tyler School of Art, Temple University in 1972 and served there as dean from 1989 to 2002. Since then she has had the distinguished title of Professor Emeritus. In 2010 she was awarded the National Printmaker Emeritus Award by the Southern Graphics Council International.

Toner's work has been included in over 100 national and regional group and solo exhibitions including the James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, PA; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia Museum of Art and Woodmere Art Museum, all Philadelphia. She has participated in national and international artist residencies including Dundee Art Centre, Scotland, 2004 and Ballinglen Arts Foundation, Ballycastle, Ireland, 2009. Her work is held in numerous public collections including Yale University, New Haven, CT; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and Philadelphia Museum of Art. Toner's work has been featured in the publication *A Primary Form of Expression*, Eldon L. Cunningham, University Press of Colorado, 1992; as well as *A Survey of Contemporary Printmaking*, Matthew Egan, Michael Ehlbeck and Heather Muise, Lazymuse Productions, 2012.

Works in the Exhibition

All Works are Courtesy of the Artist

Intaglio Prints

Contents Under Pressure, 1972
Intaglio on Murillo paper
Framed size 37 ½" x 27 ½"
Edition 12 of 25

Insessorial Ceremony, 1974
Intaglio on Murillo paper
Framed size 37 ½" x 27 ½"
Edition 15 of 25

*Stone Enclosure with
a Ramulose Border*, 1977
Intaglio on Rosaspina paper
Framed size 25 ½" x 32 ½"
Edition 4 of 25

*Each Canvas Does Not
Cover a Hole*, 1978
Intaglio on Rosaspina paper
Framed size 25 ½" x 32 ½"
Edition 9 of 25

Sensum, 1995
Intaglio on Arches cover paper
Framed size 17 ¼" x 15 ¾"
AP, Edition of 20

Fig Leaf, 2004
Intaglio on Arches cover paper
Framed size 17 ¼" x 15 ¾"
AP, Edition of 30

Uvula Uvula, 2004
Intaglio on Arches cover paper
Framed size 17 ¼" x 15 ¾"
AP, Edition of 30

Io Goes Home, 2006
Intaglio on Arches cover paper
Framed size 17 ¼" x 15 ¾"
AP, Edition of 20

Boost, 2009
Intaglio on Arches cover paper
Framed size 19 ¼" x 23"
AP, Edition of 30

Hunky Dory, 2011
Intaglio on Arches cover paper
Framed size 19" x 19"
AP, Edition of 30

Watercolor Drawings

All watercolor drawings on Arches cover paper, mounted on Arches cover paper.

Framed size 19 ¾" x 16 ¾"

Sessile, 2003

Fan, 2007

Picket, 2007

Stack, 2008

Tease, 2010

Zing, 2010

Facets, 2012

Framed, 2013

Trans, 2013

Domit, 2014

Termi, 2014

Frame, 2016

Memory, 2016

Pegit, 2016

Collage Drawings

Watercolor on antique book pages from *U.S. Geological Survey of the Territories*, Philadelphia: Thomas Sinclair & Son, 1873.

Framed size 20" x 17"

Plate II, 2018

Plate XV, 2018

Plate XIX, 2018

Plate XX, 2018

Plate XXI, 2018

Plate XXXII, 2018

Plate XXXIV, 2018

Plate XXXV, 2018

Plate XXXVI, 2018

Plate XXXVII, 2018

Collages

All magazine clippings on Arches cover paper, mounted on Arches cover paper.

Framed size 20" x 17"

Brown Scale, 2015

Gray Oval, 2015

Green Box, 2015

Black Ovals, 2016

Blue Gold, 2016

Bend Bent, 2017

Five Five, 2017

Green Four, 2017

Grid Figure, 2017

Yellow Figure, 2017

From the series
"Playing With Dolls"

#7, 2017

#10, 2017

#13, 2017

#14, 2017

#16, 2017

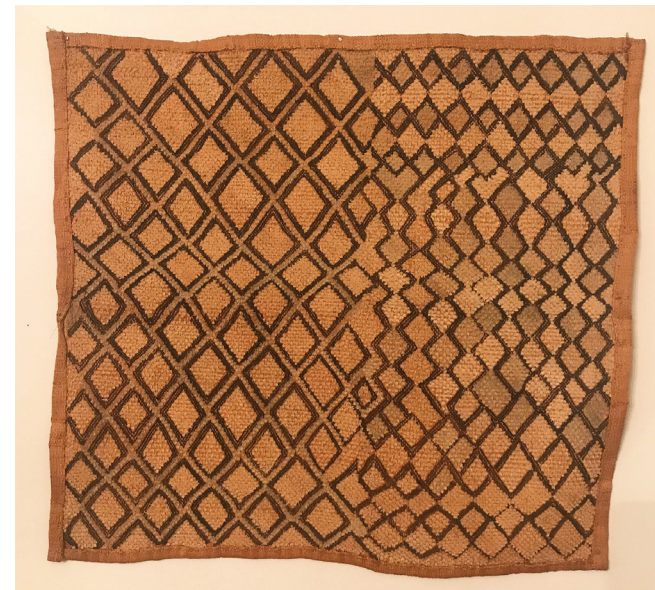
#22, 2018

#23, 2018

#26, 2018

Collected Objects

The exhibition includes groupings of objects collected by the artist, ranging from natural specimens to antique sheep shears to African textiles.



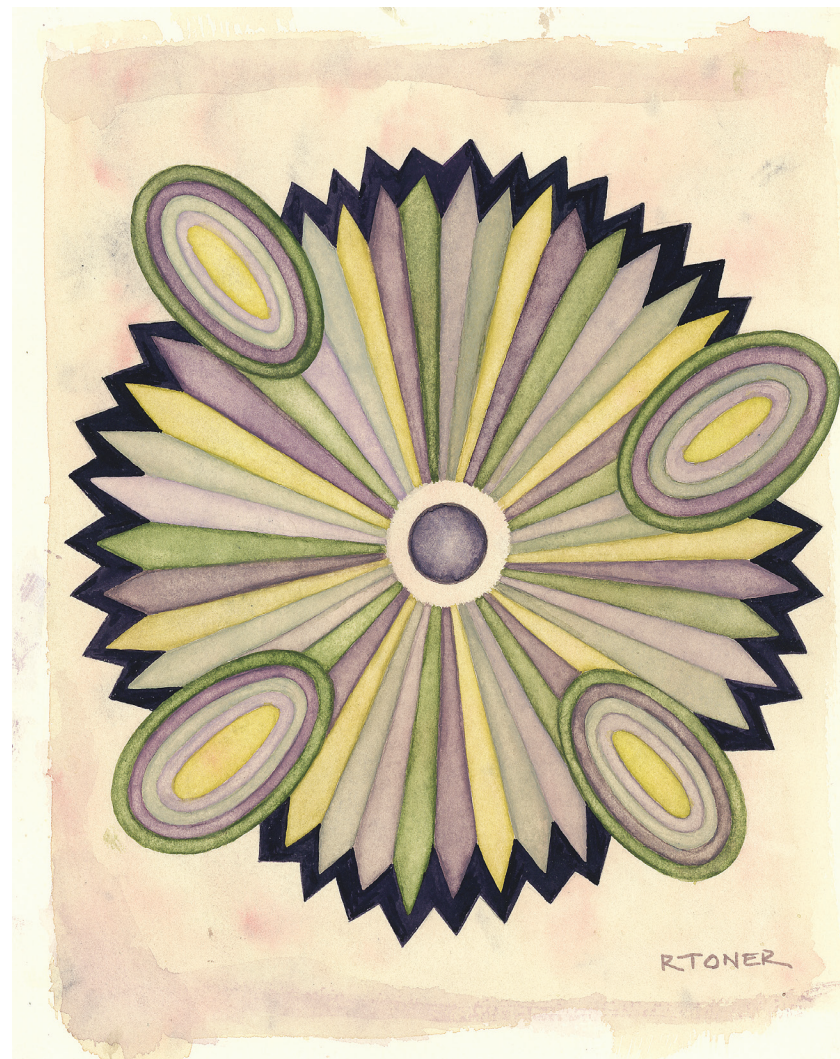
View of some of Toner's collected items in her home and one of her Kuba cloths

The Print Center

For more than a century, The Print Center has encouraged the growth and understanding of photography and printmaking as vital contemporary arts through exhibitions, publications and educational programs. The Print Center has an international voice and a strong sense of local purpose. Free and open to the public, it presents changing exhibitions which highlight established and emerging, local, national and international contemporary artists. It mounts one of the oldest art competitions in the country, now in its 93rd year, and the Gallery Store offers the largest selection of contemporary prints and photographs available for sale in Philadelphia.

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Picket, 2007

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Cover image: *Tease*, 2010