

# Foster prize competitors bring works to the ICA

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Abstract expressions rooted in concrete realities share practical thought and fanciful execution in the ICA's new exhibit featuring four finalists competing for the biennial James and Audrey Foster Prize.

From traditional portraiture to avant-garde performance art these local artists have showcased their most promising recent works, hoping to win the \$25,000 prize to be awarded in early January as well as the title of Boston's next breakthrough artist.

Exhausting the small gallery space of the ICA, curator Carole Anne Meehan has presented four distinct perspectives while also sketching some common themes. Given each artist's personal introduction of their pieces in vocal recordings (which can be listened to with iPods on loan from the front desk) the creators are as much a part of the exhibit as the creations, making their inspiration a bit more transparent, and hopefully more intriguing, than other contemporary fare. Rania Matar's photographs touch on the hybrid nature of her own life, having been born and raised in Lebanon before moving to the United States to live much of her adult life. Matar confesses that although she is an insider in the Middle East, since she speaks the language and understands the culture, she feels like an outsider in that she views her native country "through western eyes."

Her camera lens does nothing to filter the gritty realities of the subjects she chooses, however, whether it be the young girl clinging to the cinderblock wall of a refugee camp with a look of sad curiosity in her smile, or the woman adjusting her veil in a cracked mirror with calm determination. Matar does not make any political or religious statements in her work, she merely shows ordinary citizens living with extraordinary circumstances. She focuses on the strength of these people rather than the fragile nature of their existence, preferring to celebrate those "standing still in the midst of chaos."

Another artist investigating ordinary lives in a post-9/11 world is Catherine D'Ignazio, who often uses performance and interactive art to explore the themes of leaving, exiting, and evacuation. She has adapted her large scale project, "It takes 154,000 breaths to evacuate Boston," in which the artist ran the official 100-mile evacuation route and recorded the number of breaths she took, to the gallery in pieces.

Visitors may catch audio of her breaths at the exits of the museum and view the escape route displayed with white reflective tape on the gallery floor. There is a looping video projected onto the wall of D'Ignazio walking toward every exit of the ICA, showing the door open and close but her exit is never fully completed. The artist cites recent hurricanes, failing wars and the "anxious hangover" of terrorism as instigators to her question: "What is our exit strategy?"

Andrew Witkin is also interested in framing his own life within the context of political and social events, past and present. He constructs a living space, minimalistic and organized, but also littered with objects as signifiers of its inhabitant. A simple set of shelves built with neat, but unpolished wooden planks, houses portfolios, frames, photographs and notebooks, reflecting the artist's work space and personal life. Raggedy towels hang off nails on a wall, opposite a framed front page of a 1960's French newspaper yellowed with age.

Witkin combines these varied reference points to conjure "a moment in time- with the past, the present, and the future joined in" he says. He conducts this personal journey to examine what it is to be a human living in this complex time period. In addition to his installation, the artist has commissioned several friends and colleagues to hold short concerts in the museum's East Gallery throughout the coming New Year.

Art takes on a communicative and somewhat whimsical role for the final competitor, Joe Zane, who focuses on the concept of doubles in his portion of the exhibit. Zane explains that double meanings, histories and images are important to him because, "A double isn't this or that, a double is this and that." This ability to express multiple meanings and invite multiple interpretations is what fascinates Zane.

His pieces include a fluorescent light in the shape of the Italian word "Ciao" as well as a painting of the words "TI AMO ANCHE," which translates to "I love you, too." The artist also inserts himself and his role in the competition into his play with doubles by commissioning two seemingly identical portraits of himself and naming them "First" and "Second," leaving the viewer to determine whether ranking the artist or his work has significance or not.

While each artist demonstrates their particular strengths and perspectives, their shared focus on investigating and communicating about ordinary lives in a complex, and sometimes dangerous or even frightening, world offers answers and many more questions on how to navigate this unstable political and social climate. In approaching this vague and sometimes unsettling subject, these Boston locals look to create a dialogue with which the public may interact in a different format.

As Joe Zane says, "What makes art special is that it can fill that space where language and other forms of communication fail."

The work of Matar, D'Ignazio, Witkin and Zane will be on display at the ICA until March 1, 2009. A gallery talk featuring all four artists will take place Sunday, Dec. 7 at 1 p.m. For dates of musical performances in conjunction with Witkin's work see [www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org).

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