

REVIEW

## The eye can be drawn to busy work — or simple

### WORDS BECOME PICTURES.

Through March 27 at the Molloy College Art Gallery, 1000 Hempstead Ave., Rockville Centre. For exhibition hours, call 516-678-5000 ext. 6549 or visit molloy.edu.

BY ARIELLA BUDICK

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The delicate symbiosis of words and pictures has a long and fascinating history. Chinese masters of the brush and Islamic architects turned letters into images; medieval monks intertwined gilded illuminations with biblical stories and words of prayer. Now, the Molloy College Art Gallery in Rockville Centre looks at contemporary artists who use language as abstract symbol and bearer of meaning. Curator Yolande Trincere has selected seven artists who explore the creative spark that ignites when the alphabet infiltrates the picture.

Given their illustrious ancestors in Chinese calligraphy and Gothic manuscripts, it's odd that comic books have only lately been admitted to high art's august precincts. They were perceived as outgrowths of mass media, criticized both by both moralists and formalists. But in the work of Brooklyn artist Jim Torok, the tango of words and pictures verges on confessional poetry.

Torok's cartoons are autobiographical, imparting unsettling events in his life through a combination of laconic draftsmanship and succinct narrative. He appears in his own stories as a blobbish figure made up of an ovoid head attached to a huge, phallic nose. Other characters, especially his manipulative, spiteful and soul-destroying mother, are more fully elaborated. He conveys the essence of her character through the articulation of her jutting chin, gaping mouth, helmet of frizzed hair and thick, eye-concealing glasses.

With brutal but amusing honesty, Torok details his subtly poisonous relations with her, his ambivalence about leaving his family home in Indiana, his life in New York City and the lonely but fulfilling tedium of his life as an artist. Despite their apparent simplicity, he conveys a complex



Above, a riotous work by Nobu Fukui, who uses bits of comic books and magazines in his art. Below, "Untitled," a lambda print by Tucker Nichols, studies the dialogue between man and nature.



mix of rage, despair, nostalgia, contentment, insecurity and arrogance.

Nobu Fukui anoints his noisy, riotous canvases with scraps of comic books. Wonder Woman and Superman fly alongside bits of magazines and newspapers, on top of which Fukui administers clotted layers of paint, beads, and string that intensify the rollicking impact. Yet underlying the surface chaos is the artist's methodically laid out grid, the solid structure around which he builds his baroque fantasies. Ultimately, Fukui blends the commercial sensibility of pop with an almost cubist rigor.

At the opposite extreme of vi-

sual saturation are the photographs and drawings of the San Francisco Bay Area-based Tucker Nichols, whose spare aesthetic communicates as a series of pictographs. One photo depicts a wheelbarrow at rest in a field hemmed in by pine trees. On the barrow's bed, Nichols has sketched a simple stick drawing of two trees — a couple of vertical lines intersected by a few short diagonals.

Deceptively simple and delicately composed, it meditates on the dialogue between humans and nature, and the primitive urge to make one's mark on the environment.