Extending the Conversation: Julee Holcombe

Associate Professor Julee Holcombe is an adventurer and a collector. These identities make a lot of sense when one considers Holcombe’s art – stunning photographic collages assembled using Adobe® Photoshop® from photographs she’s taken in the field.

Holcombe’s work contains big ideas, including perspectives on human society’s imbalance with nature, self-voeyrism, and, as she puts it, the idea that “the more things change, the more things stay the same.”

It is not uncommon to find, in one of Holcombe’s sculptural, often unsettling, photographs seamlessly integrated images from opposite ends of the earth, such as China and America in her “Chimerica” series.

Holcombe says, “I am very nomadic. I love traveling. I like seeing new landscapes. I also like seeing how one landscape looks like another landscape, even from thousands of miles apart. That’s really important to me – the adventure of taking the photographs, and acquiring the material for the later work.”

With over forty exhibitions and two UNH Summer Faculty Fellowships under her belt, Holcombe already has covered a lot of ground, but maintains that she is continually seeking new ways – and places – to “extend the conversation.”

Holcombe’s interest in using elements from reality to build a different world altogether came independently of direct influence. She began doing collage work in 2000, on an archaeological site in Tornareccio, Italy: “I had a job photographing the finds, these little ceramic terracotta tiles from a Samnite ruin. I started collaging them together, to see what the actual terracotta tile looked like.” In this process, Holcombe found her “problem,” one she’s been working on ever since – creating a unique space by manipulating and joining together various pieces captured through her camera’s lens.

Holcombe’s first major success after she began employing the collage process was the piece Babel Revisited (2004), based on the Pieter Bruegel painting The Tower of Babel (1563). Breugel’s painting depicts the iconic biblical narrative of Babel, whose unilingual citizens attempt to build a tower reaching to heaven. God halts the tower’s construction by causing the city’s residents to speak different languages so they cannot understand each other, and scattering them all over the earth. Bruegel’s painting was the first image that came to mind for Holcombe after the terrorist attacks on 9/11: “I thought, I’ll try to depict that, because it’s very similar to a contemporary narrative, and I thought a lot of people would relate to it, because it’s biblical. I knew I couldn’t actually build a model set, so the only way to do it was to photograph different contemporary architectural sites, and then collage them into emulating Peter Breugel’s painting.”
This was a great period of learning for Holcombe, who began keeping a “shopping list” of the images and times of day she needed to photograph. It also helped Holcombe articulate an impulse which runs through all her subsequent work: getting a two-dimensional photograph to look three-dimensional.

In 2008, Holcombe received a UNH Summer Faculty Fellowship to support “Made in Chimerica,” a series of collaged photographs that incorporate imagery from her travels in China and life in America. While working on this project, Holcombe experienced what she calls her biggest artistic transition to date. Instead of basing her work off older pieces of art, she started her own dialogue. Holcombe says, “I was constantly relying on other people’s compositions to make an image. I wanted to break away from that, which was a challenge. I was looking at a lot of traditional Chinese landscape painting, but I wasn’t looking at one particular piece. I began to build my images intuitively.”

In the Chimerica series, relying on her intuition meant Holcombe not only needed to change the way she assembled her images in Photoshop®, but also the way she experienced the landscape itself. Holcombe could no longer rely on her shopping list. “I usually build the image, and then go back out and reshoot, adding to it. But I didn’t have the opportunity or the funding to go back to Wuhan and photograph this one landscape that was cloudy the day I was there.” Holcombe had to adapt her art to the landscape and experience, instead of the other way around. She says, “It’s been an evolution. I’ve built a body of work from one idea, and I’ve also had to let go of that and create ideas after the fact.”

Holcombe received a second UNH Summer Faculty Fellowship in 2011 to support work on her newest project, “A Distant City.” Holcombe is approaching this depiction as a portrait incorporating the philosophies found in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Italian fresco, “Good Government, Bad Government.” As usual, Holcombe has a problem – and a plan – in mind: “I wanted to photograph in Philadelphia, since that is the birthplace of American government. I’ve spent a lot of time in D.C., too, so I’ll be collaging those two cityscapes. And throughout the United States, because it’s becoming an attempt to merge every aspect of our American society.”

Today, Holcombe’s impulse to create a dialogue and draw a comparison between the past and the present is alive and well, but firmly based in self-trust. What might happen in the “Distant City”? Anything. Holcombe will be the first one to tell you, “As I work on an image, it can lead me down ten different other avenues.”

Go to [http://juleeholcombe.com/home.html](http://juleeholcombe.com/home.html) to view full-size images of the works shown here and to learn more about Julee Holcombe’s photography.