

Miriam Hitchcock, Cedar Crest College, March 2014

Miriam Hitchcock's *Drawing in Time; Full of Days* recalls poet Jane Hirshfield's definition of haiku: "a mere seventeen syllables with which to catch a world." Hitchcock's collage-style paintings and stop motion videos divide and measure the fluidity of time and change and movement, economically uniting random impressions, and crystallizing experience.

In the paintings, Hitchcock wires together wood cutouts of birds, branches, suburban homes, leaves, clouds, figures, arms, hands and oddball curvy shapes, all of which have been covered with plaid, stripes, drips, doodles, tin foil, gold leaf and newspaper and, as such, echo Cubist collages by Braque and Picasso, and paintings by Elizabeth Murray and Amy Sillman. Hitchcock's collage/sculpture paintings cast shadows as they hang on the wall, emphasizing the fact that they are objects, giving the cobbled together images weight, and imbuing them with vitality. The delightful *Sleeper* shows a figure hanging from a bird's beak and places on the left, a pleasant but unclassifiable shape: the bird's unconscious? his twittering made visible? delicate foliage? To return to haiku, Hitchcock balances the tensions between human vs. wild, straight

vs. organic, deep space vs. flat surface, shiny vs. natural, and inside vs. outside as if they are the poem's very syllables. Yet, being objects and not words, they resist syntax and can be read in any order and lead to multiple conclusions.

"Much of beauty, both in art and life," writes Hirshfield in *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, "is the balancing of the lines of forward-flowing desire with those of resistance—a gnarled tree, the flow of a statue's draped cloth. Through such tensions, physical and mental, the world in which we exist becomes itself." Hitchcock's *Assembled Landscapes* series balances the thrust of the human desire for safety, comfort and prosperity against the earth's indifference to these urges. *Debris with Two Story House* comfortably wedges an arm, a branch, someone's house, and tin foil together, recalling the fall ritual of gutter cleaning. A pair of hands either cover or reveal a flock of flying birds in *Drape*, protecting or dominating the natural environment with newspaper, and In *Nest*, a bird-constructed home is centrally placed and much larger than a ranch home. A giant bird in *Giotto's Tree* tips toward two ribbon-like strips that resolve at the intersection of wall and the floor, drawing the entire room into the composition. I enter these paintings from the bird's point of view, sharing the importance of home,

and since the human figures are small scale and peripheral, I recast humankind as temporary, tumbling, and wind-blown.

Hirshfield cryptically asks, "How long does each perception of the passing moment last? a single breath's intake? less?" To experience Hitchcock's paintings is to feel that you've stepped out of yourself to watch your own perception; and watching 5, 3-to-4-minute videos *is* a measurable time frame. In particular the video *Some Days* captures and deepens a moment, the poem "Blessings" by Ronald Wallace. Hitchcock draws stop action images of laundry folding itself (no hands are shown doing the work) as Wallace's clever negations of generic remarks unspool across the screen. "I have a clue," riffing on "I haven't a clue," shimmers on the surface of my consciousness. The negation of negative quips becomes an affirmation: "I can see the forest for the trees" and "there is a business like show business" and "there's rest for the weary" all highlight the importance of a well-placed "not" or "no" and, likewise, the importance of emptiness in art and life. Music holds the viewer inside humble action, melding image and poetry, and the repetitive task of folding clothes and its associated daydreams add mystery and relevance to an already compelling poem.

Hirshfield again: "Life is composed solely of fleeting instants. In the briefest moments our first breath begins, our last ends. In the briefest of moments anger rises, or desire starts to wane. . . . Our fleeting lives do not simply 'happen' and vanish, they *take place* in the physical world . . . within a sense of permeating aliveness. . . ." Poetry is a component of Hitchcock's work, yet it could also be considered a blueprint for its composition. The action of a poem, the fact that it's musical and requires time to be read reinforces her art's innate restlessness. Disquiet is a forward-flowing desire, and the artist, her materials and her audience are buffeted by that desire. The *Landscape in a Glass* watercolors compress and funnel suburban neighborhood images claustrophobically. In the video *Always*, a bouquet-of-flowers shape frames a changing landscape succumbing to rain. Birds flit from branch to branch, paint drips and streaks, and drawings are erased and drawn again. As a whole, the show informs and eludes just like the 5th stanza of Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

I do not know which to prefer
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendos,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.