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_Somewhere In-Between: A Visual Analysis_

It is fairly easy to get lost in thought while perusing the American University Museum. Rich, colorful paintings scale the walls surrounding spindly, impossibly-balanced abstract sculptures. Among these are edgier, darker pieces of an industrial feel. The variety is mind-boggling. I was gazing absentmindedly upward at a three-story phallic totem pole when I nearly ran into someone.

At least, I thought I had.

That “someone” turned out to be a “somewhere” - namely, _Somewhere In-Between_ by award-winning sculptor Genna Watson. _Somewhere In-Between_ is a mixed-media and papier-mache masterpiece, strikingly lifelike and yet completely bizarre.

Watson, born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1948, is a native artist with far-reaching talent. While earning her BFA from the Maryland Institute of Art and her MFA from the University of Wisconsin, Watson developed her signature additive-layer sculpting method. This painstaking process consists of layering material over a frame, allowing the artist
more freedom than subtractive sculpting (chiseling marble, for example) (Nance). Watson’s work has won both local and international acclaim, from the Maryland Annual Baltimore Museum of Art First Prize in both 1970 and 1971 to a residency in Altzella, Germany in 1999 (Watson, Sculptor).

Watson’s biography on her website claims that “she develops works that call attention to the complex, unknowable sides of the human condition” (Watson, Sculptor). Indeed, many of Watson’s pieces have an abstract, suggestive quality, but none so much as Somewhere In-Between. It is difficult not to be drawn to the sculpture due to its minute details and magnetic appeal: simply the silhouette of a hanging man with a gun through his neck is a head-turning image. Yet Watson’s Somewhere is more than just an eye-catcher. It is a stellar example of visual metaphor, drawing from a plethora of different experiences to create a piece that truly lives up to its name. Through her use of visual contrast in Somewhere In-Between, Watson masterfully captures the concept of unity as a result of diversity within the human condition.

Somewhere ignites the idea of unity through presentation. The sculpture itself is life-size, standing at about six feet tall. The form appears to be generically human, neither distinctly male nor female, in a casual position with one foot tucked behind the other and arms folded in front of its body. This presentation directly contrasts with the more traditional pieces featured in the gallery, drawing the viewer’s eyes towards its uniqueness. Even the sculpture’s placement is out-of-the-ordinary. The piece hangs inches from a wall, facing towards the entrance, almost as though the figure is a fellow museum-goer taking a moment to breathe in his surroundings. Immediately the piece becomes accessible to a broad range of publics simply because it looks so human. Watson’s use of presentation in Somewhere is enthralling because it eliminates the paradigms of its viewers at first sight: it is completely indiscriminate. The sculpture is sans
gender, sans race, sans pretention or complicated meaning that scares away anyone other than an art philosophy major. All that is required of the viewer is that he or she be human. Even at first glance, Watson’s piece unifies its diverse audiences by breaking them down into one category: human.

The concept of unification only deepens with each of Watson’s stunning material details. The figure itself is mixed-media, comprised of wire, paper, needles, thread, trash bags, fabric, and clay. Watson makes a strong statement with her assortment of media, suggesting that people are made of much more than one single substance and yet all connected by these similarities. Somewhere argues that no one is cut from the same exclusive cloth: rather, we are a stuffed, sewn-together patchwork of different experiences that ultimately unify us. Even Watson’s additive-layer process suggests human unification: she adds layers of material over a frame to create a work, symbolizing the similar core of the human condition, regardless of its outer appearance. This sentiment is strong even in the more minute details of the sculpture. For example, the figure’s head is covered with neatly groomed hair on one side and a tangle of bent wire on the other. On one side of the sculpture’s torso, wires peek through the paper-like exposed ribs, while on the other side, blue thread weaves between pins in neatly arranged patterns. The mixed, contrasting textures support Watson’s belief that people are more than a single feature. We are all puzzle pieces that ultimately come together to shape a human form, and we are all equally diverse and equally jagged.

Perhaps Watson’s most effective commentary on unity within diversity is her use of contrasting abstract imagery. Symbols of gender, freedom, and violence are all employed within Somewhere to represent polar opposites within the human condition, which in turn encompass the entire human race. Watson incorporates gender-specific details in the form of Somewhere to
support the idea of unity in humankind regardless of sex or sexual orientation. The figure’s face appears female, with delicate features and long, fine eyelashes, yet the form is breastless and bears male genitalia. Watson breaks down barriers with this depiction of gender: she claims that people cannot be defined by their assigned gender and that our defining characteristics are not limited to sex. The figure seems at peace rather than at odds with its contrasting features, with the genitals noticeable but not a focal point. By hinting at the role of gender and sex in Somewhere, Watson suggests that genitalia are only facets of the physical form that should not divide people. Men are from Mars, women from Venus, and both are from the human condition.

Juxtaposing symbols of freedom and bondage present a further foray into the oneness of humanity. The Somewhere figure is completely nude, lending itself to an air of exhibitionism, and yet the arms of the person are crossed over the chest and pelvis as though trying to conceal itself. This position is Watson’s allusion to the struggle people face between being truly themselves and acting with propriety for the sake of society. Humanity (and specifically American humanity) has long been obsessed with the concept of freedom. Yet conflicting emotions arise from this notion: how truly liberating is “freedom” when freedom shines light upon the parts of us we do not wish others to see? We censor ourselves despite the fact that we have free will. Every person, as a human, has experienced self-censorship. Although our experiences may be different, the inner turmoil between letting go and holding in is universal.

Watson’s commentary on freedom continues with the motif of bondage featured in the piece. The person in Somewhere hangs from a choker around its neck, eyes closed, feet dangling about an inch off the ground. It is somewhat reminiscent of both a fetus, fragile and dependent, and a lynching, premeditated and deadly. There is a sense of mortality, finality, and futility here. But shockingly, the figure seems to be at ease. Its face is poised in an almost thoughtful
expression, its body leaning forward as though preparing to take flight. Contrasting elements of both imprisonment and the anticipation of freedom highlight how humans are limited by external constraints. Whether they mask themselves as the government, society, or prejudice, these constraints hold back humanity like a bird chained to its cage. And yet, as Watson reveals with the figure’s ready-for-takeoff stance, humans are ultimately in control of their destiny. The visual comparison between bondage and freedom reiterates how constraint and hope for release are both universal aspects of the human condition. Some people are bound by literal chains, others by oppressive governments, and others by strict parents, but ultimately they are united in their feeling of hope for liberation.

Finally, Watson includes a chilling image of violence in Somewhere to characterize humanity’s darker unifying force. This idea is present in the form of a gun placed strategically through the figure’s neck. Watson may include this obvious symbol of violence to suggest the difficult battles people face against others - and themselves. For some, the decision may realize itself as a literal weapon or as a bully at school, for others, a taunting professor or crippling, self-destructive depression. Watson encompasses the diverse strife that is inherent within the human condition, be it between warring peoples or within a turbulent soul.

In all, Genna Watson’s Somewhere In-Between is a riveting look into the features that define and unify the human race. Through the piece’s presentation, its array of materials and textures, and stunning visual metaphor, Watson effectively portrays unity as a result of diversity instead of as a detriment to it. She claims we are more than polar opposites - freedom and violence, male and female, black and white. We are somewhere in between.
