



Met Show Features Faculty Artist's Work

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Artwork by faculty member Nancy Dwyer appears in "The Pictures Generation: 1974-1984," an exhibit on view at the Met through August 2, 2009. (Photo: Sally McCay)

1977 group exhibit titled "Pictures" at Artist's Space in SoHo.

In April, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, not generally regarded as a bastion of contemporary work, ushered the 1970s movement into its hallowed, marble halls with "The Pictures Generation: 1974-1984," the first major museum exhibition to focus on the tightly knit group of artists. Dwyer, a member of the UVM faculty for the past five years, has two pieces on display in the 30-artist show.

While she was surprised the Met initiated the retrospective and pleased to be included, Dwyer says the full impact of being in the exhibit didn't really hit her until she stepped into the museum. "As I was walking by some Roman antiquities, I was realizing 'I'm in a show where Roman antiquities are,'" she says and laughs. "All of a sudden it started seeming pretty big to me. Going up those great stairs that are at the center, the feeling just built as I was walking in."

In the mid- to late-1970s, Nancy Dwyer and a circle of friends lived the life of young artists in downtown Manhattan. They worked jobs to make ends meet, some dabbled in the emerging post-punk/new wave music scene, and, above all else, they dedicated themselves to creating art. "I think I was conscious that I was part of a movement, but I didn't give it much importance," Dwyer, UVM associate professor of art, says. "Looking back, the exceptional part to me is just how serious we were as artists."

Across the years since, critics, collectors, and art historians have affirmed that not only was this circle serious about their art, they were serious artists. Their movement has come to be known as the Pictures Generation, named for a

The 'correct' art

In an April 23 *New York Times* review of the Met exhibit, Holland Cotter defines some of the ties binding the Pictures Generation: "They were born in the mid-1940s to early '50s, in a prosperous but paranoia-prone cold war era. They were the first kids to be raised with television, fast food and disposable everything. As teenagers they were soaked in Pop Art, rock and rebel politics. As art students, even in traditionalist programs, they felt the effects of Conceptualism. Ideas replaced objects and images. Painting was pushed to the side. The movement questioned what art was for and redefined what could be art."

In her office tucked in a fourth floor nook of Williams Hall, Dwyer considers the 1970s mindset driving her own art and her fellow artists. "It was a time when we were realizing that we're being lied to in the media," she says. "How do you gain control over that? How do you have an identity as a human in America? We took that on through our artwork."

The Pictures circle included artists such as Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Richard Prince, and Sherrie Levine. They drew energy and ideas from one another — making studios visits, discussing their work and art theory. "We continued a sort of academic practice long out of college," Dwyer says. "I had the kind of fervor about ideas, about what was the 'correct' artwork to be making that one might have about religion. At the time I was just against expressionism. Expressionism was just *bad*. Morally wrong." As she often does, Dwyer clears any whiff of pretension with dry humor and a quick laugh. "That seems kind of adorable to me now."

Dwyer paid the bills with a job at the landmark, pre-chain-store-era Barnes and Noble at Fifth Avenue and Eighteenth. She describes herself as the "Magic Marker Girl" of the store's sale annex. "I would write \$10.99 on a card and cross it out and write \$6.99," she says. "Because I had really good handwriting." (Art trivia: She moonlighted her Magic Marker talents crafting concert posters for her friends' bands, creating the intriguing possibility that a CBGB's poster stuffed in a box in someone's attic is also an early Nancy Dwyer.)

While Dwyer's day-job at Barnes and Noble grew to include the craft of retail display work, she turned down opportunities to pursue that road as a "real" job. "I did art mainly and I fit jobs around that," she says. "I was very aware of making those decisions. I definitely had that kind of ethic."

Pictures and words

"Cards" and "Yoga Woman" are the two Dwyer works of the era included in the new Met exhibit. The artist created "Cards," a piece made up of 26 small prints, in 1979 while working as a visiting artist at the California Institute of the Arts. Describing her focus at the time, Dwyer says, "I had been doing these very simple outline drawings of people in gesture, kind of an idea of language, pointing to the meaning of human gesture, figurative gesture, without actually defining the meaning."

While a number of the Pictures Generation artists have a higher profile than Dwyer, the show's curator, Douglas Eklund, sought to bring to light some of the more underappreciated art and artists of the era. In an interview in *Art in America*, Eklund notes of Dwyer, "She's a great artist who is respected by her peers and her work should be better known. To see her work next to Cindy Sherman's — they were best friends — will be illuminating for a lot of people."

While Dwyer's work in more recent years — which includes sculpture, painting, public art, and installations — is frequently rooted in text, she sees a direct connection to what she was doing 30 years ago. "For me it's a straight shot," she says. "I think I was dealing with language all along. I was trying to distill the picture to its essence and to its implied meaning, almost iconic meaning. I was kind of making icons out of pictures. So, what's the most common icon in our world? It's a word."

[The Pictures Generation: 1974-1984](#) is on view through August 2, 2009 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Read more about Nancy Dwyer's work on her website, nancydwyer.com. See this [New Yorker magazine slideshow and commentary](#) by Peter Schjeldahl on the Pictures Generation.