

---

# A viewer steps into the frame

By Cate McQuaid

Globe Correspondent / April 27, 2011

Diego Velázquez's 1656 painting "Las Meninas" is one of the great paintings of Western art history. With its canny composition and the central position of a mirror, the painting investigates illusion, reality, and space. With it, Velázquez made a stunning declaration about the power of art, and of the artist. David Ording pays homage to Velázquez's painting with his installation "Reconocer" (the Spanish word for "to recognize"), at Carroll and Sons, and extends the artist's ideas off the canvas and into three-dimensional space.

"Las Meninas" depicts the young Spanish princess known as the Infanta Margarita and her courtesans. On the wall behind them hangs the mirror, glittering with the blurred reflections of her parents, King Philip IV of Spain and Mariana of Austria. To the left stands Velázquez himself, at a giant canvas, looking directly at us. The suggestion is that the king and queen are his subjects, and the princess and her entourage have been gathered to entertain them while they sit for their portrait. That would place the viewer squarely in the royals' shoes. Other art historians posit that the mirror reflects what is on the painter's canvas. Either way, we are in a realm of projection and representation.

Ording has painstakingly painted, to scale, a mirror image of "Las Meninas," which hangs at one end of the gallery. A mirror covers the wall across from it. It is nearly impossible to gaze at the painting's reflection without encountering your own. That's unnerving — "get out of the picture, already," I thought to myself — but wasn't Velázquez inviting a degree of self-consciousness in his viewer? By adding in the space that the viewer inhabits, Ording, in his own way, completes the picture. Plus, it's fascinating to see that the reflection appears to deepen the space within the image, and to resolve loose brushstrokes into realism.

"Las Meninas" is ultimately a painting about painting. It helped set artists on a trajectory of increasing self-awareness that ultimately led to Modernism. Ording has made a career painting reproductions, examining and deconstructing the power that iconic images hold. Like Velázquez, he follows a great art historical quest to parse truth and illusion, and to be a witness to how images reflect human consciousness.

## Deciphering the coding

Hank Willis Thomas makes a witty and disturbing investigation of representations of race in his show at samson. He harvests images from advertising and popular culture and repurposes them, sometimes removing brand names, sometimes adding his own text.

"Scandalously Good!" is a jaw-dropper. The titular words, minus the exclamation point, appear in chrome over a grainy image of Jacqueline Onassis and the young James Earl Jones. He wears a white robe (Jones was filming "The Great White Hope," in which he played boxer Jack Jefferson). Onassis is in black. There's an ocean of meaning between their shy smiles. She tilts her head, averts her gaze; her shadow falls between them. In art terms, and in celebrity culture, they are both objects of desire and fascination. "The Great White Hope" came out in 1970; what was the power dynamic between white women and African-American men then? And how would it change if the white woman were Jackie O and the black man, James Earl Jones?

Works from Thomas's "Unbranded" series present pictures from ads of the last 40 or 50 years aimed at an African-American audience, minus the product, asking us to put together what is encoded in the image about power and desire. "Are You the Right Kind of Woman for It?" presents a black man on a throne-like wicker chair, flanked by two sultry white babes. He's manly, kingly, even, and chomping on a big cigar. It's funny to see these ads stripped of their products. The manipulation of imagery has a visceral effect that, in the context of flipping through a magazine, we are usually numbed to.

## The cyber effect

Curator Elizabeth Keithline has put together a small exhibit tackling a big topic: "A Tool Is a Mirror." How does technology reflect us? We use it, and it rewires us and changes society. The show, up at Mobius, is part of the Boston Cyberarts Festival 2011.

Some of it, such as Brian Kane's "OMG!" a giant inflatable speech balloon that comically embodies virtual communication, is spot-on. For her "Eye/Hand Series," Sheila Gallagher went to Boston College's Eye Tracking Lab, and "drew" images as a sensor followed her eye movements, throwing eye-hand coordination to the winds. The bristling, awkward drawings of female athletes are feats of concentration.

Dennis Hlynsky's "Flight Paths" is a startlingly lovely digitally altered video of the gestures made in the sky by flying birds. In "Kitchen's Door," Erik Sanner makes a fun new foray into painting theory by projecting a video onto a painting of a doorway.

Other works stumbled, such as the group Aerostatic's digital piece "Transmission From a Dying Planet," which featured text such as "I love you, I have to go" buzzing over a staticky monitor. A bad transmission cannot overcome its frustrations with sad underlying meaning. In life, yes, but not in art.

Cate McQuaid can be reached at [catemcquaid@gmail.com](mailto:catemcquaid@gmail.com).