

Duality: In Unplain Sight

It's not often we get to see with someone else's eyes. As a terribly nearsighted person, I like to think having someone else put on my glasses gives them an idea as to how the world looks to me unaltered—but I'm pretty sure that's not how it works. Heather Heckel's brilliant still-lives and portraits in *Duality: In Unplain Sight* let us see through her eyes, though, and what amazing vision she has indeed. Heckel has strabismus, and her ensuing double vision provides a thought-provoking lens through which we can view her—and our—world.



Most striking of Heckel's portraits is her self-portrait. The photorealistic face is partially obscured, the blurred visage on the left showing a more completely identifiable face. Yet this very obstruction makes a fundamental truth real: we may see clearly, but we cannot know someone—or something—completely. In any circumstance, with any person or object or moment in time, we will miss something, regardless of whether the full truth is purposefully obscured or simply not entirely present. People have different faces for different occasions, and Heckel's self-portrait exemplifies the partial view *and* the complete, hidden view to which we can only aspire.

The same is true for objects. Heckel's series of porcelain animals are done in a similar style, photorealistic to her vision. The titles of some of these pieces suggest stories we don't know: "Duchess," "Samuel Whiskers," "Squirrel Nutkin." As with people, objects hold stories and truths beyond what any one person can know. In this way, every object is a work of art: they inspire thoughts and enable interactions unique to each person, each moment. Heckel's work shows us the multifaceted nature of reality itself through her unique way of seeing.

Coltsville: Before Context

The duality present in Heckel's photorealistic work is at play in a different way in her series about the newly minted Coltsville National Historical Park in Hartford. I visited the

installation at Real Art Ways prior to the gallery opening to view it with park ranger Amy Glowacki, who provided historical background and guided me around the site, allowing me to trace Heckel's footsteps many months later. Heckel's series is a very focused look at Coltsville, which aligns with her other hyperfocused work on porcelain figurines.

The Onion Dome is featured in almost every piece. Gloriously exemplified in "Onion Dome," the blue dome is patterned with gold stars, another element common to the series. The Onion Dome sits on top of the historic Colt's Patent Fire-Arms Manufacturing Company and has graced the Hartford skyscape since 1855 (with a few interruptions). The dome looms over the site and is visible across the historic complex.¹ In "Red House," the shape of dual Onion Domes



stand in as the sky, with their stars cast as actual stars: the Onion Dome, a stand-in for Colt and his factory, is big brother-like in its pervasiveness. The whole universe is reflected in this microcosm: home, dome, and all the rest. The focus on worker housing underscores the capitalistic parasitism that permeates the site.

The placement of the Coltsville series in the gallery between other works of her style (portraits on the left wall, miniatures on the right) provides the context of dual vision and hidden subtext. The Coltsville pieces are photorealistic, without Heckel's double vision. The details are flawless, particularly in the ornate guns of "Crossed Guns" and "Arsenal," and there is a particular duality in the bold colors paired with pastels. Still, the sharpness comes across as

¹ <https://www.nps.gov/colt/learn/historyculture/bluedome.htm>

propagandistic. What would the series look like with the softened dual image that comes from her strabismus? Could it have functioned as more of a critique of Coltsville?

Coltsville: With Context

On my return to Real Art Ways that evening, I was able to snag the pamphlet about Heckel's work, in which I read about her strabismus—and got the last piece of the puzzle: the gold stars each represent a dead soldier.

With the full context, I was able to look at the pieces with a fresh eye, and the overall effect was far grimmer than the generally pleasant view I'd gotten before. The "Crossed Guns" each emit a stream of ended lives; the chimney stacks in "Smokestack" huff out empty breaths; the Colt mansion in "Armsmear" oozes death out of the front archway. The "Onion Dome" is literally drowning in fallen soldiers. These little gold star stickers, most commonly associated with a "good job!" or "well done!" at elementary school, are chilling markers of what the gun industry wrought not just in Hartford, but on the world stage.



Heckel's work does indeed play with "unplain" sight. There are design choices that speak to harmony when a more aggressive choice might have made more sense: the "Crossed Guns" aren't pointed at each other, which may have suggested more of the conflict involved, yet their position does echo the fact that Colt sold guns to different sides of conflicts. The Colt business itself was the real winner in those wars.

In conversation with Traé Brooks, Heckel's work feels very quiet. Her messages are far subtler on a similarly important issue—guns and gun violence—particularly in Hartford, where

gun violence is such a pressing issue. Without the added context, her work can seem like a celebration rather than a nuanced conversation.

With that knowledge about the gold stars, however, you can see how deeply Heckel has considered Coltsville. Every piece is touched by death, even the “Management Apartments” that show housing built to accommodate the influx of workers. You can see by the empty windows that the buildings aren’t pristine—what does it mean that the buildings are crumbling yet still have such a presence in the area?



Heckel provides us a unique look into her world and into Coltsville National Historical Park. Her work is technically flawless, beautiful, and thought-provoking. Thanks to her work, we can see through her eyes—and what incredible eyes they are.