

Minnesota artists go big for 'On the Verge' exhibition at Rochester Art Center

Rochester Art Center hosts the yearly Minnesota showcase.

By [Alicia Eler](#) Star Tribune

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"Thoughts and Prayers" by Essma Imady.

It's 2019, and technology is all around us. The premise of artists working at the intersection of art and digital culture has become passé, but the 10th edition of [Art\(ists\) on the Verge](#) (AOV) is still riding this wave.

For the second year in a row, the annual exhibition is housed at the Rochester Art Center, which gives five Minnesota artists at least a small gallery space for each of their installations.

[Lindsay Halleckson](#)'s "You Are Sky" considers the technologies people use to "protect themselves." But really this show is more about aesthetics and the relationship of bodies to space. A hanging silver sheet welcomes people into its spiral while a heat lamp above casts a warm glow. A series of fiberglass sheets hang from the ceiling, creating a layered effect in front of a window. A sound

installation changes depending on where the visitor walks. These experiences are reorienting and disorienting, but don't seem all that technology-related.

[Khadijah Muse](#), who immigrated to the United States from Kenya at age 12, creates a participatory game that follows a series of yes/no questions printed onto small paintings on the floor. They ask things like: "Have you ever lived in more than one country?" and eventually lead to two open doors with sculptures behind them where visitors can contemplate. The piece is sincere and engaging, but the last part of it — you can take a Polaroid of yourself or your surroundings — seems like an odd throwback for a show premised on technology.

Chris Rackley's multi-piece installation "Does Your Shoe Have a Boy Inside?" uses several means to re-create memories from his father's shoe store, from entering a life-size shoe box to actual shoe boxes containing memories of the store's warehouse. Visitors can peer through little peepholes and see scenes from the past, such as a worker's desk late at night. This work is like a fun house, minus mirrors and plus nostalgia.

[Kathy McTavish's](#) wild full-gallery installation "Swarm" is an immersive work that includes three components: a programmed orchestra of drawing and singing machines on a series of cheap Acer monitors; algorithmically generated hardcover books, and quilts stitched with code and made by robots. Sitting in the middle of the space, with monitors flashing shapes and projections of weaving around the walls, makes one realize how seamlessly our physical bodies are merging with the digital.

The title of Essma Imady's installation "Thoughts and Prayers" references the common condolence turned cynical meme often referenced by politicians after mass shootings. It's become empty, a way to sidestep genuine change. Imady grew up in Damascus, Syria, and moved to Minnesota in 2011, just before the Syrian civil war broke out. Her two-part installation involves a projection of patterns onto the floor that changes when people walk on it, and a tent where visitors are welcome to take a necklace and "join," or do nothing and remain alone.

In both **McTavish** and Imady's work, technology truly does transform people's relationships to themselves and other bodies in space, which is what this "intersection of art and technology" is about, giving new life to a stale concept.

Art(ists) on the Verge 10

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tue.-Sat., through Feb. 8. • **Where:** Rochester Art Center, 40 Civic Center Drive SE., Rochester. • **Admission:** \$5 adults, free for ages 15-under and members.

Info: 1-507-282-8629 or rochesterartcenter.org.

The RAC bounces back

Art(ists) on the Verge — a mentored fellowship program funded primarily by the Jerome Foundation — was rescued by Rochester Art Center’s artistic director, Sheila Dickinson, after the [now-permanently-closed Soap Factory](#) in Minneapolis went on hiatus. Next year, however, it will return to the Twin Cities as an outdoor show of public sculpture.

The Rochester center has come back from its own [financial crisis](#), when it faced a \$279,099 operating deficit in 2015 and nearly closed. Brian Austin, [who became executive director 13 months ago](#), said the RAC is on track to have a small surplus.

The center has only five full-time employees, compared with 11 two years ago. Programming continues as usual, though, with three major shows per year in the main galleries, exhibitions changing every four months on the second floor and new shows by southeast Minnesota artists every six to eight weeks upstairs.

Most exhibitions are grant-funded. “I am very budget-conscious, which is why they love me,” said Dickinson.

RAC is aiming to become more of a statewide destination for contemporary art. In February 2020, it will host the [Soomaal House of Art](#), a Minnesota-based Somali artist collective, for its first show outside the Somali community. Four international artists, including Ann Hamilton and Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, recently visited to discuss works-in-progress that will be a part of Rochester’s [redesigned Peace Plaza, scheduled to be unveiled in 2021](#).

“I think people in the [Twin] Cities are looking at RAC more attentively now,” said Dickinson. “The Soap was over 10,000 square feet, wasn’t it? That’s what the art center has — a huge amount of space for contemporary art.”

Twitter: [@AliciaEler](#)

Alicia Eler is the Star Tribune's visual art critic/arts reporter. She is the author of the book “The Selfie Generation” (Skyhorse Publishing), which has been reviewed in the New York Times, WIRED Magazine and the Chicago Tribune.

alicia.eler@startribune.com [612-673-4437](tel:612-673-4437) [aliciaeler](#)