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Dazzling data: Artist Heather Gordon transforms GreenHill's gallery into a metaphorical map room

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At first glance, Heather Gordon's big solo exhibition at GreenHill appears to be an elaborate exercise in geometric abstraction, and the title unprintable in a family newspaper.

Wrong on both counts.

There's far more going on here than explorations in geometric form, and the title is "Shift Happens," with an emphasis on the initial word, as if to demonstrate that it's not street slang for excrement.

It's a key word, "shift," here denoting the sum of societal changes stemming from and incident to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has formed the real-life backdrop for some of the work on view.

It figures that Gordon is the offspring of an accountant and a logistician, as we're informed in the show's online catalog. She has characterized herself as a kind of map maker. In her drawings, paintings and installations, she systematically translates socially meaningful data into geometric-abstract visual compositions.

They're visually engaging works even without reference to their sources, but the show contains ample evidence that there's more to them. This evidence consists largely of ancillary texts mounted on the gallery walls.

The only texts accompanying some of the early works are their titles, leaving viewers to speculate on their content and underlying methodologies.

For example, Gordon's paintings "Echo Facing Inward" and "Echo Outward Facing" both date from 2018. Their titles suggest a formal relationship, but they're visually striking compositions without any extraneous references. The former reads as a mandala in subtly modulated shades of green and yellow, while the latter is a dazzling, symmetrical arrangement of multi-layered horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines and bands of yellow and orange. I suspect Josef Albers (famed artist and educator) would give her an A.

The title "Happy Talk" is shared by two paintings Gordon made last year. They also share several prominent visual characteristics, including a predominance of bold red and angularly labyrinthine or interlocking concentric structures. Their title alludes to mis- or disinformation, which "reframes information in bright sparkling packages," in Gordon's words.

"Happy talk," in that sense, is a style of communication often practiced by former President Donald Trump, as Gordon reminds us in a group of four graph-paper drawings that incorporate passages of traditional figuration and typography.

In the one titled "Mentiri" (Latin for lying or deception), she juxtaposes Trump's seemingly cheerful, early prediction about the COVID-19 pandemic — "It's going to disappear one day ..." — with relevant quotes from William Golding's novel "Lord of the Flies" and French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne's essay "On Liars." Each of these quotes is neatly printed out on a small scale and translated into a binary code according to which some of the graph paper's tiny squares are blacked out while others are left unmarked.

All of these textual and coded components are superimposed on a realistic drawing of a pig's face, alluding to the quoted passage from Golding's novel. The graphed passages of binary code constitute a meaning-infused, geometric abstraction whose counterparts are more prominently featured elsewhere in the show.

Another of these graph-paper drawings, ironically titled “Sunshine Enema,” centers on a realistic drawing of a Lysol disinfectant canister. This drawing’s binary-coded texts contrast Trump’s suggestion that disinfectant might be injected into the body to cure viral infection with the disclaimer subsequently published by Lysol’s manufacturer.

Gordon translated messages pertaining to the pandemic and related social issues into site-specific, geometrically precise installations that spatially dominate the show. She created these by applying 1.5-inch-wide, colored tape to the gallery’s walls and other architectural components, in configurations based on or influenced by origami, the Japanese art of paper-folded sculpture.

The four square support columns down the center of the gallery serve as the site for her gold-tape installation “Essential Worker.” Gordon converted that phrase into numerical values she used to plot this work’s shape and form. Reproduced in the catalog and as a single-page gallery handout is the original drawing from which the installation was derived, accompanied by handwritten annotations.

Likewise, “No Justice, No Peace” — a phrase attributed to Martin Luther King Jr. — is based on the phrase’s numerical conversion into a system of concentric stripes in alternating sections of purple and black. The overall form is based on an origami pattern known as “mountains and valleys.” A double-page spread in the catalog includes Gordon’s precisely measured, preparatory drawings for this striking temporary mural, which stretches across 96 feet of two adjoining walls.

Among its other components, this provocative exhibition also includes a literally atmospheric video installation projected onto a portable wall. Its placement near the previously discussed group of four drawings is thematically strategic, hinting at Gordon’s relief at Trump’s defeat in the 2020 election.

In “My Whole Soul is in This” she filmed the passage of clouds across the sky over her backyard during President Biden’s inaugural address, a phrase from which is quoted in the title.

It’s an apt metaphor for domestic tranquility, however transitory.

Want to go?

What: "Shift Happens," a solo exhibit of work by Heather Gordon

Where: GreenHill, 200 N. Davie St., Greensboro

When: Through June 26.

Gallery hours: Noon-5 p.m. Thursday-Saturday or by appointment

Information: 336-333-7460 or www.greenhillnc.org