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VIDEO: Unlikely Superheroes — “Secret Identities” at Driscoll Babcock

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(Homepage image) A detail of Justin Bard Yarmosky's "Whispering Grass," 2015, currently on view at the "Secret Identities Superheroes and Selfhood" exhibition at Driscoll Babcock.

(Courtesy of Driscoll Babcock Galleries)

Summer may be the time for superhero blockbusters (hi, "Ant-Man"), but now, at Driscoll Babcock, it's also the time for superhero art. "Secret Identities: Superheroes and Selfhood" (through August 14) presents the work of seven artists — Katherine Bradford, Caroline Wells Chandler, Chitra Ganesh, Mark Newport, Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Peter Williams, and Jason Bard Yarmosky — each of whom comes at the theme with a different focus, a range of ideas about heroism and who gets to lay claim to it.

"We wanted something fun," said gallery director Tess Schwab, speaking of the show's genesis. "There's a lot of really great artists dealing with this popular, iconic theme — but reversing it and using it in an interesting way."

The reversals in question tend to involve power, placing the hyperbolic trappings of "super" onto the shoulders of those our society tends to ignore, if not actively downgrade. For example, Jason Bard Yarmosky has created a large photorealistic rendering of his grandmother, who is currently suffering from dementia, in a sagging Wonder Woman costume and pink wig, evoking both her personal strength in continuing to be his collaborator and the lesser position often afforded the elderly in our well-documented youth obsession. Peter Williams, on the other hand, began painting his classically cape-decked hero "The N-Word" in a six-week frenzy earlier this year as a response to the wave of police violence against unarmed black men. And Caroline Wells Chandler's crocheted "The Boi Wonder," decked out in a Robin-reminiscent get-up, nods toward queer and trans identity politics with double mastectomy scars and a radiating rainbow phallus.

Other works in the show poke holes in existent superheroes' supremacy — see: Mark Newport's crocheted costumes, dangling limp and deflated from the ceiling, or Katherine Bradford's simplistic paintings of an ineffectual Superman. Chitra Ganesh even directly cribs imagery from the 1960s Indian comic series "Amar Chitra Katha" to construct the surreal, sci-fi world of her female-centric collages.

Of course, each work also implicitly points toward another kind of strength: the power of putting on a costume. "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person," Oscar Wilde once quipped. "Give him a mask and he'll tell you the truth." When it comes to superheroes, that mask is often literal, color-coordinated, and some kind of indestructible — but it's no less true of the artists who depict them. It's a peculiar paradox, so central to any kind of creative practice, that being the most "oneself" means putting forth some kind of constructed façade. But it's through dressing up that comic book heroes make clear they're ready to save us, and it's through creating these highly pop-referential pieces — sometimes goofy, sometimes poignant, sometimes raging — that these artists can begin, however slightly, to shift our cultural conversation. All in a day's work.