Mirror, mirror on the floor of the Rose Art Museum in Waltham
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As sophomore Jill Martin danced across the mirror-like floor of the Rose Art Museum, a spider web of cracks appeared beneath her feet, instantly fracturing the reflected images of paintings hanging on adjacent walls.

Instead of vandalizing the new installation by Walead Beshty, the international global studies major from Atlanta was participating in the spirit of challenging new exhibits in the Brandeis University museum.

For the first group of shows he's organized since taking over at the Rose, new director Christopher Bedford collaborated with Beshty to offer "On the matter of abstraction," a complex exhibit that transforms two floors of the Gerald S. and Sandra Fineberg Gallery into "parallel narratives" that may open some eyes and befuddle others.

Along the walls of the first-floor gallery, Bedford and Beshty have brought together 13 large, mostly abstract paintings from the Rose’s collection, including works by Ellsworth Kelly, Judy Chicago and Fritz Glarner, all, except one, completed before 1977.

The 33 more recent works in the downstairs floor, including paintings by Williem de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg and Hans Hoffman and a recently acquired piece by Mark Bradford, reveal, in Bedford's words, "a contrasting investment in the unruly."

Beshty compared a visitor’s passage from the first to the ground floor to a descent from "the cathedral to the cave ... both existing as traditional sites of ritual, contemplation and communion."

The London-born Beshty has installed a second untitled work in both floors that affects visitors’ perceptions of both sets of works in changing ways.

He has covered the floors of both galleries with a mirror-like glass that crackles and then fractures like thin ice when visitors walk on it, distorting the reflections of paintings from "On the matter...” displayed on the walls.

Beshty’s work is fun because he turns visitors into vandals and co-collaborators
who seemingly deface the esteemed works they’ve come to see.

Constructing a floor that fractures under pressure is a bit like giving visitors cans of spray paint and inviting them to tag valuable works by Robert Motherwell, Al Held and the new Bradford work, "Father You Have Murdered Me.”

At the simplest level, Beshty might be suggesting contemporary artists - and the public - must be willing to subvert all that’s gone before or to view it through the prism of provocative new ideas to reach the cutting edge.

Beford offered the more theoretical view Beshty’s unnamed work might collapse the so-called "analytic” and "unruly” narratives that distinguish the works on the two levels.

"While Beshty’s floor may lack an image of its own, it absorbs the world around it through reflection ...” Added Bedford, "over time and through use the surface cracks as a result of visitors’ movements, subsequently taking apart the images of the objects we see in it, until finally that reflected world is nothing more than a dense matrix of fractured images and jagged lines.”

Perhaps it’s too conventional but by seemingly breaking paintings from the museum’s collection a visitor might wonder whether Beshty’s mirrored floors are intended to recall the fairly recent crisis the Rose survived when Brandeis’ former president suggested selling off major works to cover a fiscal shortfall.

The Rose is hosting a retrospective covering six decades of innovative works by Ed Ruscha who uses familiar things like billboards or gas stations to provoke meditations on the connections between the objects and words and ideas. Displayed in the Lois Foster Gallery, "Ed Ruscha: Standard,” showcases 70 paintings, prints, drawings, photos and films that reveal an artist who uses spare images to convey complex ideas.

Organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art where Bedford used to work, the exhibit is making its only East Coast stop at the Rose.

Born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1937, Ruscha imbued images of gas stations and road sign with a vacant spaciousness reminiscent of Western scenes viewed through a haze of gasoline vapors.

Many works initially have a minimalist Pop Art feel but on second look they are packed with ideas that must be teased out. Several of Ruscha’s signature images, like his 1966 screenprint "Standard Station” suggest the Aristotelian observation that "nature abhors a vacuum.” Looking at near-identical images of literally standardized gas stations with soaring roofs bearing identical Standard signs and matching gas pumps, viewers might consider the elusive connections between words and pictures and how they shape our perceptions.
In other works, like "Sin," the word nearly obliterates the actual bank of dark clouds, further subverting the obvious links between language and image.

Another side of Ruscha’s singular vision can be seen in a limited edition version of Jack Kerouac’s 1957 novel "On The Road" which includes more than 50 of Ruscha’s stark photos that correspond to passages in the novel.

Sam Jury is showing a series of video installations in the Rose and at several locations across campus that use painterly imagery to evoke the conflicted relationships between humans and the natural and built environments.

Under the collective title "Sam Jury: Coerced Nature," the videos combine natural scenes that seem both familiar yet more imagined than real. Jury presents closeups of landscapes that have the heightened realism of a dream or hallucination.

In addition a video in the Lee Gallery of the Rose, Jury's videos "About Nowhere" can be viewed in the Shapiro Campus Center and three others can be seen in the Goldfarb Main Library.

Director of Academic Programs Dabney Hailey, who organized the Jury exhibit, said, "While Jury's body of work includes painting, performance, photography and video, 'Coerced Nature' focuses on her video installations which marry elements of all these mediums. The artist refers to her video work as sitting between 'trauma and rapture,' between passive and active gazes, and between isolation and voyeurism. These ambivalences, which in many ways characterize the digital age, cohere in Jury's charged, entrancing works of art."

Bedford said the current Rose show is "the first large-scale solo museum exhibition of Ed Ruscha's work in the Boston area."

"Consequently, this region will have the rare opportunity to look and think deeply about an artistic trajectory over decades that has left an indelible mark on the history of art," he said.