The Shape of Things presents works of art that are defined visually by distinctive shapes and collectively occupy an area where abstraction and representation meet. Some of the work has clear representational elements but on certain levels reads as abstract. Other works are mostly abstract or even non-objective but can trigger associations with the representational world. The exhibition, therefore, plays with the relative nature of abstraction and non-objectivity on the one hand and representation and figuration on the other.

Brittany Watkins’ mixed media works merge abstraction and representation through the use of pillow covers and suitcases to create abstract works of art. Ceramic artists Daniel Bare and Nick Boismenu combine representation and abstraction by using objects such as mugs, bowls and cups as building blocks for abstract artworks that rely strongly on formal qualities. In Tolulope Filani’s wooden sculptures, figuration and abstraction battle for dominance as the contortion and positioning of single and multiple figures or heads results in abstracted scenes.

Sharon Campbell’s ceramic bowls and vessels literally are representational objects but as artworks derive their interest from their exquisite shapes and volume, texture and coloration rather than the fact that one can put something in them. Similarly, Morgan Kinne’s drawings clearly represent building facades, but their intrigue as artworks and their energy come from their inventive overall shape, the smaller shapes within them and their interaction, and the lines and coloration. Melissa Stang doesn’t draw her representational objects and scenes on paper but on and in clay surfaces with irregular, organic forms; the clay tablets’ shapes are a pronounced departure from a typical rectangular or square drawing surface, which gives the overall work an abstract feel. With her clay sculptures, Stang asks the public to rearrange their parts, which amounts to an invitation to play with the works’ abstract components and formal presentation.

Kathleen Thum’s drawings look like abstracts, but her dense, dark organic shapes created with charcoal both represent and are coal; her large, hand-cut-paper Offshore wall piece initially reads as an expressionist abstract until oil-industry-related infrastructure reveals itself. John Wright’s cross paintings clearly present crosses, but their starkness and isolation inevitably place them within the tradition of hard-edge abstraction. Betsy Chaffin directly refers to the mingling of abstracted shapes with figurative elements in her paintings. In Mark Brosseau’s colorful abstractions, physical spaces, landscapes even, immediately spring to mind, but so does mental space.

Michael Dwyer’s work might read as entirely non-objective but relates to movement, physically, but also as it might relate to music. Liz Rundorff Smith’s work also appears non-objective, but she translates space and memory of space and takes clues from street signs, dumpsteres, fences and other everyday things. Moreover, the deliberate repetition of forms and shapes in Smith’s work creates its own representation – that of one painting representing a previous one.

The exhibition shows that the lines between abstraction and representation might be somewhat artificial. This should not come as a surprise to anyone who has, say, stared up into the foliage of a tree, with or without sunlight coming through from above, or who has taken a closer look at the line patterns of tar on repaired roads. Abstraction and representation make up our physical environment wherever we go, abstract shapes and representational structures and objects interacting and hiding in plain view.

The exhibition also suggests that conceptually, too, there doesn’t have to be a sharp distinction between abstract and representational art. The artists in the exhibition address issues that artists farther removed from the area where abstraction and representation meet also engage. Bare deals with the environment and consumerism, and Thum, with fossil fuel and sustainability. Between them, Brosseau, Campbell, Chaffin, Filani and Smith explore a wide range of existential issues; issues relating to space and time; and personal memory, feelings and expression. Watkins explores discrepancies between internal experience and external expression. Wright looks at his experiences as a Southerner, cultural clichés and American culture in general. Kinne explores the mystery and poetry of buildings as imprints of people. Stang is interested in imagination and experimentation. Boismenu addresses art itself in questioning the distinction between art and craft. Dwyer explores the formal side of art and abstract art’s ability to trigger emotions.
As a group, the artists show that formal and aesthetic choices and degrees of abstractions and representation don’t necessarily predetermine or preclude conceptual concerns, and vice versa. Creating visual poetry through the use of symbols, metaphors and other non-literal devices, alongside more literal representations or not, allows artists to address any aspect of human existence. The degree to which artists gravitate toward abstraction or representation or happily ride the perhaps non-existing fence between them is secondary in this respect.

Wim Roefs  
Exhibition Curator & Board Chair, 701 CCA

**The Artists**

**Daniel Bare** (American, b. 1973) lives in Central, S.C., and teaches at Clemson University’s art department. He holds an MFA in ceramic art from New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University.

**Nick Boismenu** (American, b. 1987) lives in Columbia, S.C. He holds an MFA with a concentration in ceramics from East Tennessee State University and undergraduate degrees in ceramics and experimental psychology from the University of South Carolina.

**Mark Brosseau** (American, b. 1976) lives in Greer, S.C., and teaches at Clemson University and Wofford College. He holds a BA in studio art from Dartmouth College and an MFA in painting from the University of Pennsylvania.

**Sharon Campbell** (American, b. 1943) lives in Travelers Rest, S.C., and is the owner of Campbell Fine Art Research and Appraisal. She holds an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a BFA from Wesleyan College.

**Betsy Chaffin** (American, b. 1944) lives in Beaufort, S.C. She holds an undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and studied art at Anderson Ranch Art Center in Colorado and The Studio School in New York City.

**Michael Dwyer** (American, b. 1963) lives in Columbia, S.C. He holds an MFA from the University of South Carolina and an BFA from Syracuse University.

**Tolulope O. Filani** (Nigerian, b. 1957) is the chair of South Carolina State University’s Visual and Performing Arts Department in Orangeburg. He has a degree in sculpture from Yaba College of Technology in Lagos, Nigeria, and a PhD, MED and BED in visual arts and art education from the University of Missouri.

**Morgan Kinne** (American, b. 1988) lives in Charleston, S.C. She received an MFA in contemporary sculpture from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, and a BFA in sculpture from Winthrop University.

**Liz Rundorff Smith** (American, b. 1977) lives in Travelers Rest, S.C., and is the art school director of the Greenville Center for Creative Arts. She holds an MFA in painting from Edinboro University and a BA in studio art from the College of Wooster.

**Melissa Stang** (American, b. 1960) lives in Columbia, S.C. She holds a BFA in studio arts from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

**Kathleen Thum** (American, b. 1969) lives in Central, S.C., and teaches at Clemson University’s art department. She has an MFA from Bowling Green State University and a BFA from Maryland Institute College of Art.

**Brittany Watkins** (American, b. 1989) lives in Columbia, S.C. She holds an MFA from Florida State University and a BFA from the University of West Georgia in her hometown of Carrollton.

**John Wright** (American, B. 1962) lives in Estill, S.C., and teaches art at North District Middle School in Varnville, S.C. He received an associate degree and BA in art studio and an MAT in art education from the University of South Carolina.