

A show of masterful illusions

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The trompe l'oeil tradition is almost as old as art itself, and the new show at the Brandywine River Museum proves that artists "fooling the eye" of the viewer has lost none of its appeal.

One of the opening images, Will Wilson's "Convexed" (2004/5) captures the artist surrounded by objects from his art-school past as he pokes his paintbrush out of the frame toward the viewer. The whole piece, by the way, is rendered as a reflection in a convex mirror.

Nearby are two dazzling tricks -- Otto Duecker's "Dali" and "Dalai Lama," which create magic. Showing black-and-white photographs of painter Salvador Dali and the Dalai Lama taped to textured walls, the works reveal details in the masking tape and shadows that demand to be touched. Don't do it, of course, but do appreciate the fact that the surface is actually flat oil paint.

Text panels with most of the works go into the depth of training and tradition behind these visual puzzles, as well as the careful selection of objects in each painting. Frequently humorous, the paintings tweak our perceptions and make wry comments in their compositions.

A life-size human figure seems to pop out of the canvas in Mikel Glass' "Emergence" (2006), and postcard reproductions of famous paintings hang in a false niche in Scott Fraser's fascinating "Catenary Curve" (2008).

The immaculately rendered light and shadow on old wooden molds in "Revolution" by Charles Pfahl will convince you the piece is three-dimensional, as will the bird perched delicately on the frame of "The Brood" by Eric Conklin.

Two of the showstoppers are next to each other in the gallery. "Krista" (2005), by Steve Mills, is a poignant assemblage of objects on a bulletin board. Rendered with absolute accuracy, the items --- medals, photos, cut-out newspaper comics, a birth certificate -- not only trick your eye, but they encapsulate a young woman's life.

Next, "Top Shelf" (2007), also by Mills, is a row of oversized Wall Street Journals, with the folded edges and typefaces reproduced so well that you want to reach out and pull one off the shelf.

There's a strong local interest in John Yerger's assemblage on a faux white panel, "Helga (Homage to Andrew Wyeth)." And take time to read the story behind "Target the Artist" by Robert C. Jackson. With a red balloon animal precariously taped to a paper target and surrounded by pointedly named soda crates, Jackson makes a strong point about Andrew Wyeth and the nature of art criticism.

You're certain to find your own favorites, of course. Bits of each painting will have you doing double-takes, and you leave the exhibit in awe of the skill of these artists. Yes, you've been fooled, but you've also been enlightened and challenged. You can't ask more from an art exhibit.

"Reality Check: Contemporary American Trompe l'Oeil" continues through Nov. 18 at the Brandywine River Museum (Route 1, Chadds Ford). Admission is free on Sept. 19 and 26. Call 610-388-2700 or visit www.brandywinemuseum.org.