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Magazine

- [HOME](#)
- [About the Magazine](#)
- [Magazine Staff](#)
- [2014 Issues](#)
- [2015 Issues](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Shop Local](#)

[Home](#)

[November 2015 Issue](#)

In Art – Colleen Woolpert

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By **Victoria Russo**



Photo by Jingu Wan

Stacks of stereographs sit in the center of two rectangular tables pushed together in the corner of Colleen Woolpert's studio in Syracuse's Near Westside. Nearby lies an aged, wooden stereoscope, the hand held instrument used to view stereographic images – sets of two similar photographs taken from slightly different perspectives – in three-dimensions.

Mock-ups of books with blue covers and cardboard stereoscopes, inspired by the Erie Canal museum's 3-D book Syracuse and its Surroundings, represent a project the artist/inventor hopes to pursue.

Woolpert's appreciation for stereograph photography stems from its ability to engage an audience in several ways. The independent images tell a story, as a photograph and as a historic object, and the interactive process transplants the viewer into that story's setting.

She will share this experience with the public during her December exhibition, Syracuse in 3-D, which will feature stereographs of Syracuse taken between 1860 and 1900. The collection of images, typically not put on display in galleries, come from archives at the Onondaga Historical Association (OHA), where Woolpert curated Sights Unseen: Stereographs from the OHA Collection, shown from Sept. 2012 to Apr. 2013. She reaches across the table for one, by the photographer George W. Fenner, titled Night view in the 800 block of S. West St. The snowy houses, illuminated by a street light and located in the same neighborhood as her studio, no longer exist.



Photo by Jingu Wan

Syracuse's Westside is also home to the mutoscope, an early motionpicture device that has intrigued Woolpert since she was a child. It marveled her to work so close to its birthplace. But this clear connection between her work and her location became blurred when Woolpert considered that the four inventors, like all of the photographers in her upcoming exhibition, were men. "It's enough to make me want to stop telling the story," says Woolpert. "I'm a little bit tired of trumpeting these heroic endeavors of men when I know there were a lot of women who were doing things, but they didn't get recognition or they weren't given the opportunity." Women worked behind the scenes, typical for that time period, and helped to manufacture stereographs by cutting the images and pasting them to cards. But decades later, Woolpert has developed her own stereographic invention, a patent-pending device she calls the TwinScope Viewer.

Her viewer, part of a larger body of work called the TwinScope Project, will be incorporated into her exhibition. Sights Unseen was a piece of this project, as well as SyraViews, the permanent stereo-viewers displaying historic photographs at Forman Park. The upcoming show is designed to allow audience to interact with both the images and Woolpert's invention. "[It's] far and away one of the best viewers for stereo-photographs that I've ever seen," says Daniel Ward, curator at the Erie Canal Museum and a PhD in history. "It's extraordinarily well-made. It's the Rolls Royce of stereo

viewers. She has great ideas and she's extremely knowledgeable, particularly of vintage stereographs." By presenting these images in a small and personal setting, Woolpert hopes to restore some respect and reverence for the art of stereography.



Colleen Woolpert

Her interests and experiences inspire her work as much as her innate awareness of the world around her. A natural interconnectedness exists between herself and her art, her art and her place, her place and the past. She motions to an image on her studio wall.

Two women, both with blue shirts and red lips, stand against a crimson background. They appear almost identical, differing by the length of their chestnut hair. "My twin sister, here," she says, "and I, we are like that stereo camera, where the conception happened simultaneously but two slightly different versions of that same DNA were expressed." Her twin sister, a painter and drawer in Chicago, was born with strabismus, a visual impairment that affects how an individual perceives depth. They're outwardly the same, but view the world with slightly different perspectives.

Woolpert's exhibition Syracuse in 3-D will be on display at the SALT Quarters Gallery, 115 Otisco St., through December. An opening reception will be held on Dec. 4 from 5 to 8 p.m. The gallery does not have regular visiting hours, but the public is welcome Sat. Dec. 5, 12 and 19 from 1 to 3 p.m. or weekdays by appointment. Please contact Woolpert at cwoolpert@gmail.com or 315-412-5890 to schedule.

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