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Blue Greenberg: New works at area galleries

- BY BLUE GREENBERG, Columnist
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The Semans Gallery is the first art space in the Durham Arts Council building and sometimes gets bypassed. Dorothy Anderson Wasserman's photographs are too interesting to miss, so slow down and give them a long look. Each photograph has a bit of wall text that gives a description of the image in verse. The artist explains in her written introduction that all the photographs are original and are the substance of these photographic collages which she assembles by hand. Only after she has the image she wants does she digitize it, and print it on rag paper, using pigmented inks.

For example, on a visit to Paris she photographed Notre Dame and in "Because the World is Round," 2004, Wasserman takes the viewer to the roof of the cathedral to see Paris and the Seine from a bird's eye view. Standing off to one side is a female figure holding a small stained glass window, like a fragile ball, and, on the other side is a Shetland pony.

As I walked around and read the labels I learned Wasserman's great grandfather had lived in St. Cloud, Minnesota. Her trip there was the result of a Geraldine Dodge Foundation grant to study her family history. "First Avenue South," 2006, is her photographic version of the 19th century folk artist Edward Hicks' "The Peaceable Kingdom," based on the biblical texts (Isaiah 11:68, also echoed in Isaiah 65:25) as if it had taken place in the town of her ancestors.

We talked by phone and she told me she is a teacher and always introduces her students to Hicks' work because it is about peace between animals and humans. In "First Avenue" she shows us the town, with a view of the river and its bridge, and the animals and humans sharing space. There are sheep, lions, apes, tigers, llamas, buffalo and kangaroo living side by side with children and adults nearby. Wasserman's figures, animals and humans, and her backgrounds, like the river, the bridge, and the grassy bank, are repeated several times so the final image is just a little out of sync. It is what gives her photographs their edge.