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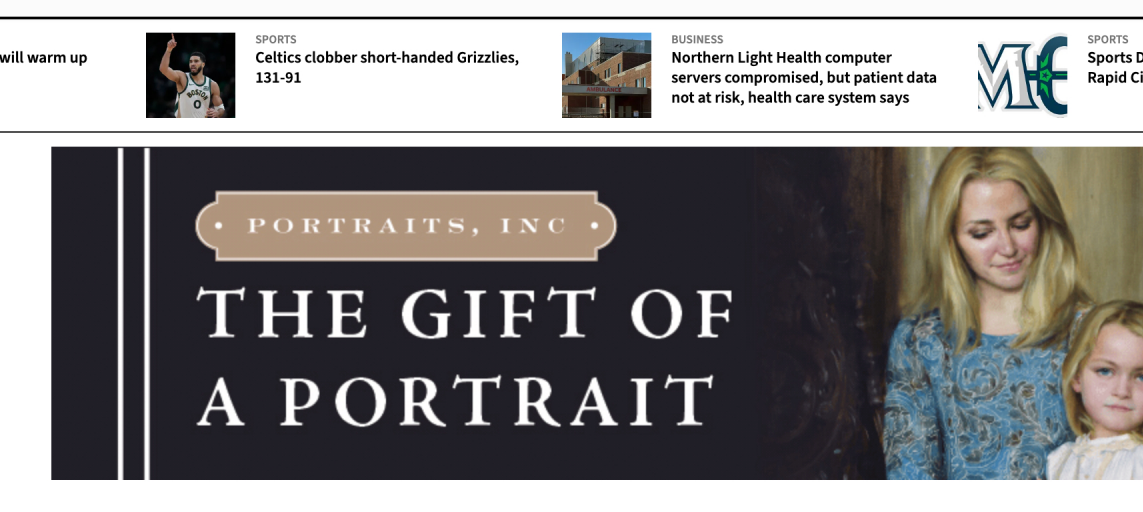

Arts Review | Arts & Entertainment

Art review: In weavings and in photos, artists ably mine moments of humanity

Works by Sarah Haskell and Richard Wexler are on display at the Maine Jewish Museum in Portland through March 1.

Posted 4:00 AM

Jorge S. Arango

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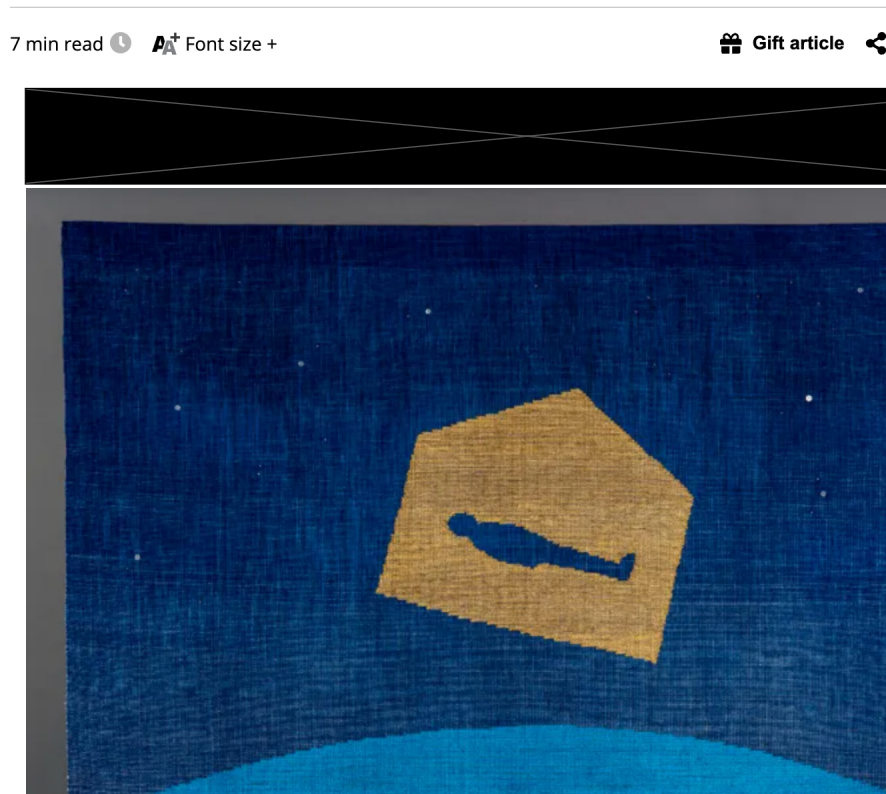
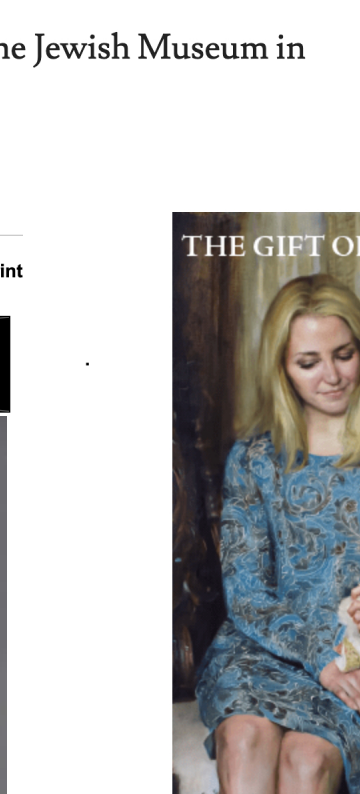


Sarah Haskell, "Unhinged 1" *Photo by Andrew Edgar*



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Two very different types of art experiences are currently on offer at the Maine Jewish Museum, one with a hushed interior focus, the other looking outward with curiosity about the diversity and quirkiness of human – specifically, urban – life.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Narrative Thread: Conversations with the Heart" and "NYC Street Dance"

WHERE: Maine Jewish Museum, 267 Congress St., Portland

WHEN: Through Mar. 1

HOURS: Noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, Monday, Thursday and Friday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-773-2339, mainejewishmuseum.org

"Sarah Haskell, Narrative Thread: Conversations with the Heart," as you might guess from the title, is the first; "NYC Street Dance," a show of Richard Wexler's photography, is the second. Both run through March 1 (a third, "My Real Life, Adeline Goldminc-Tronzo," a show of portraiture, primarily, is also on view).

Haskell's exhibition combines masterful craft (weaving, crochet and embroidery) with profound, melancholic ruminations on loss, vulnerability, the ephemeral nature of all things and, as her bio states, "the astonishing gift of being human." The York artist has no religious or cultural connection to Judaism, except a deep appreciation for the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer that touches upon many of these universal themes to express gratitude for a higher mystery (God, in a word) that transcends the impermanence of human life and its day-to-day concerns and strivings.

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More specifically, her "Praise for Life—Kaddish" series of weavings draws inspiration from a poem of that name by Mark Belletini, a minister in the First Unitarian Universalist Church, which expands on the fundamental meanings of the Kaddish and its various forms. All of these feature a woven house-like structure (a metaphor for the tabernacle or dwelling place of the soul).

Stacked under the roof along one or the other side are pieces of paper on which Haskell has written Belletini's poem, rolled it up and stitched it into the weaving. The rest of the individual designs relate to particular lines of "Praise for Life": stalks of wheat ("May our children's children harvest the dreams/we plant in our brief lives"), swirling vortexes of memory ("Praise for the sacred power of remembrance"), interweaving strands and clasped hands ("Praise for the dream of justice here upon the earth,/equity and well being for the whole of humanity") and so on.

All of these (and other works) are composed of linen, paper and cotton that Haskell has hand-dyed through natural processes that embody the concept of metamorphosis (exposing them to rust, bleach, compost and weathering). The ombré-like effect in some works that smoothly and almost imperceptibly change hue as they move from one part of a work to the next is a result of precise (and sublime) calculation that also emphasizes the dynamism of all things, the constant unfoldment of the universe.

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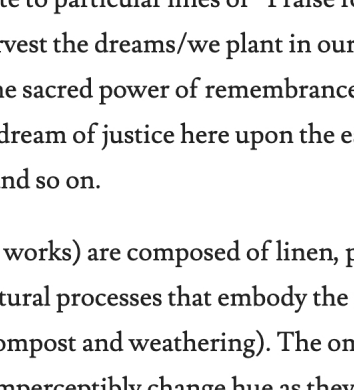
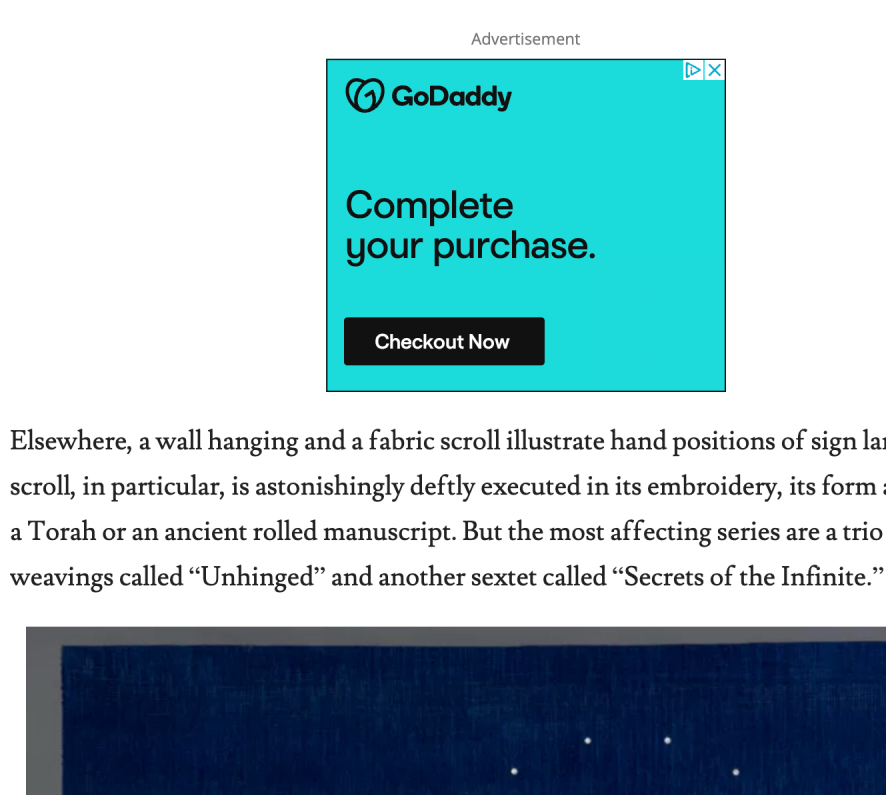


Elsewhere, a wall hanging and a fabric scroll illustrate hand positions of sign language. The scroll, in particular, is astonishingly deftly executed in its embroidery, its form also recalling a Torah or an ancient rolled manuscript. But the most affecting series are a trio of Haskell's weavings called "Unhinged" and another sextet called "Secrets of the Infinite."



Sarah Haskell, "Unhinged 3" *Photo by Andrew Edgar*

"Unhinged" followed the death of a loved one and all feature a figure and a house in various states of losing and regaining ground. They track her own fluctuation of emotions: the sense of instability (represented by the house lifting off the earth and being set adrift in space); the feeling of losing a part of oneself (the figure, Haskell, limned as barely a broken, porous outline of a body tumbling out of the house); and surrender (the body now a vibrant solid red line, willingly diving into the unknown). Oddly, these are hung right to left. But perhaps this is a nod to the way Hebrew is read.

"Secrets of the Universe" is, not surprisingly, more enigmatic, most of them involving an interplay between a human figure and a raven, which in many cultures is a symbolic harbinger of transformation and rebirth. My favorite of these is one in which the figure is bent over, the raven on its back, as the figure hatches an egg from its head. In all the works illustrating this interaction of bird and human, one or both characters emanate something from their mouth or head, which I took as an indication of old ideas of "self" moving through and out of the body.

Haskell's work is lyrical and meditative, and the dexterity she displays with her medium reveals an artist who has honed her craft for over five decades. They are also beautiful in a way that is appropriate to the show's title, for that beauty resonates most palpably in the heart.

FROZEN MOMENTS

The Richard Wexler works I am most familiar with are his photographs of Paris, where the Cape Elizabeth resident spends part of his time. They are spontaneously captured street images of people performing their daily routines, with a particular eye for odd juxtapositions – such as a masked elderly man walking past, and oblivious to, a mural of a woman in an elegant hat seemingly removing her blouse, the words "Porter le chapeau" on a painted scroll next to her.

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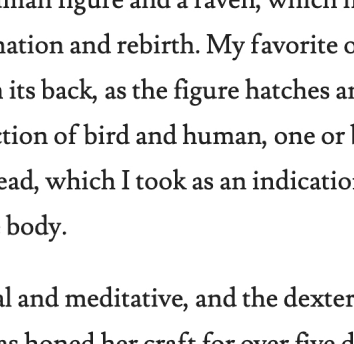
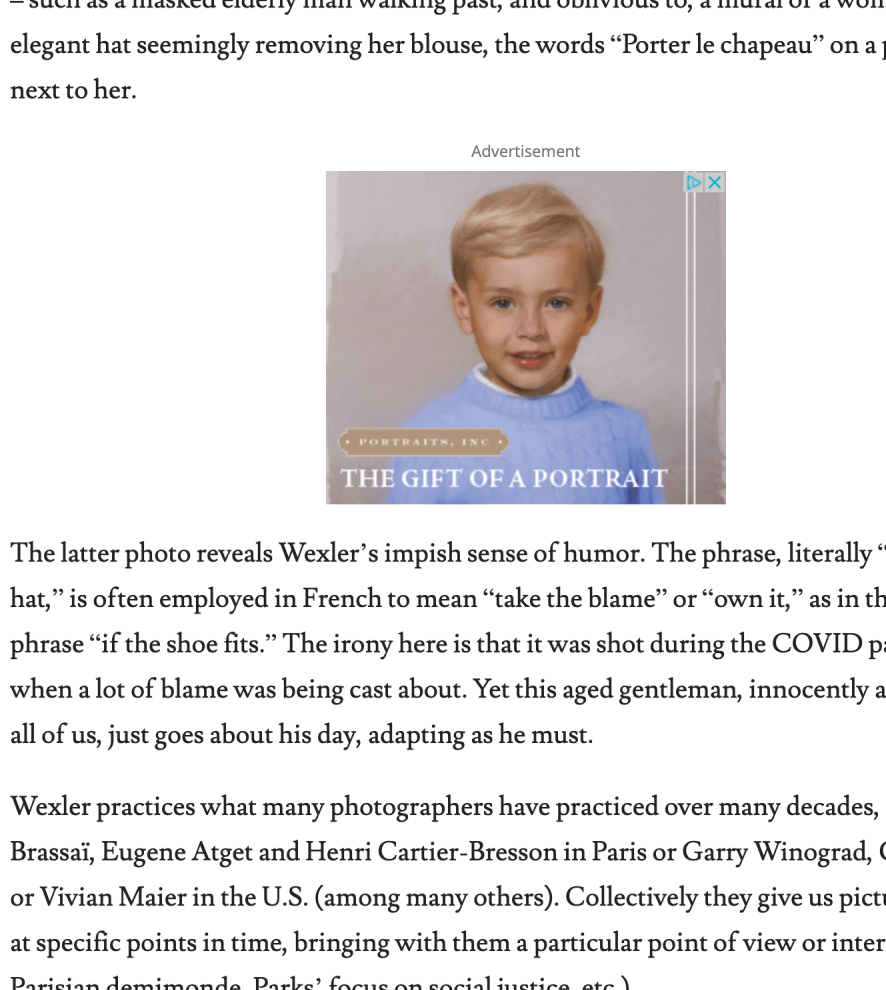


The latter photo reveals Wexler's impish sense of humor. The phrase, literally "wear the hat," is often employed in French to mean "take the blame" or "own it," as in the English phrase "if the shoe fits." The irony here is that it was shot during the COVID pandemic, when a lot of blame was being cast about. Yet this aged gentleman, innocently affected like all of us, just goes about his day, adapting as he must.

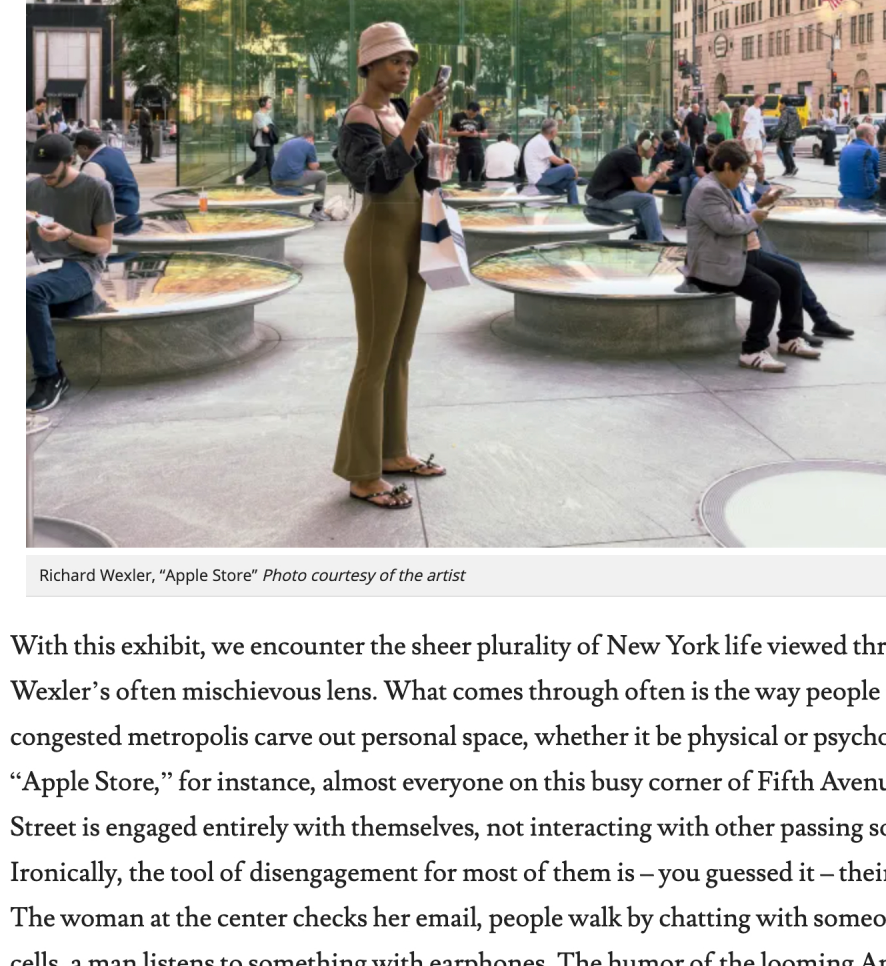
Wexler practices what many photographers have practiced over many decades, including Brassaï, Eugene Atget and Henri Cartier-Bresson in Paris or Garry Winograd, Gordon Parks or Vivian Maier in the U.S. (among many others). Collectively they give us pictures of cities at specific points in time, bringing with them a particular point of view or interest (Brassaï's Parisian demimonde, Parks' focus on social justice, etc.).



Richard Wexler, "Apple Store" *Photo courtesy of the artist*

With this exhibit, we encounter the sheer plurality of New York life viewed through Wexler's often mischievous lens. What comes through often is the way people in this congested metropolis carve out personal space, whether it be physical or psychological. In "Apple Store," for instance, almost everyone on this busy corner of Fifth Avenue and 59th Street is engaged entirely with themselves, not interacting with other passing souls. Ironically, the tool of disengagement for most of them is – you guessed it – their iPhones. The woman at the center checks her email, people walk by chatting with someone on their cells, a man listens to something with earphones. The humor of the looming Apple store here blends with our initial perception of urban alienation.

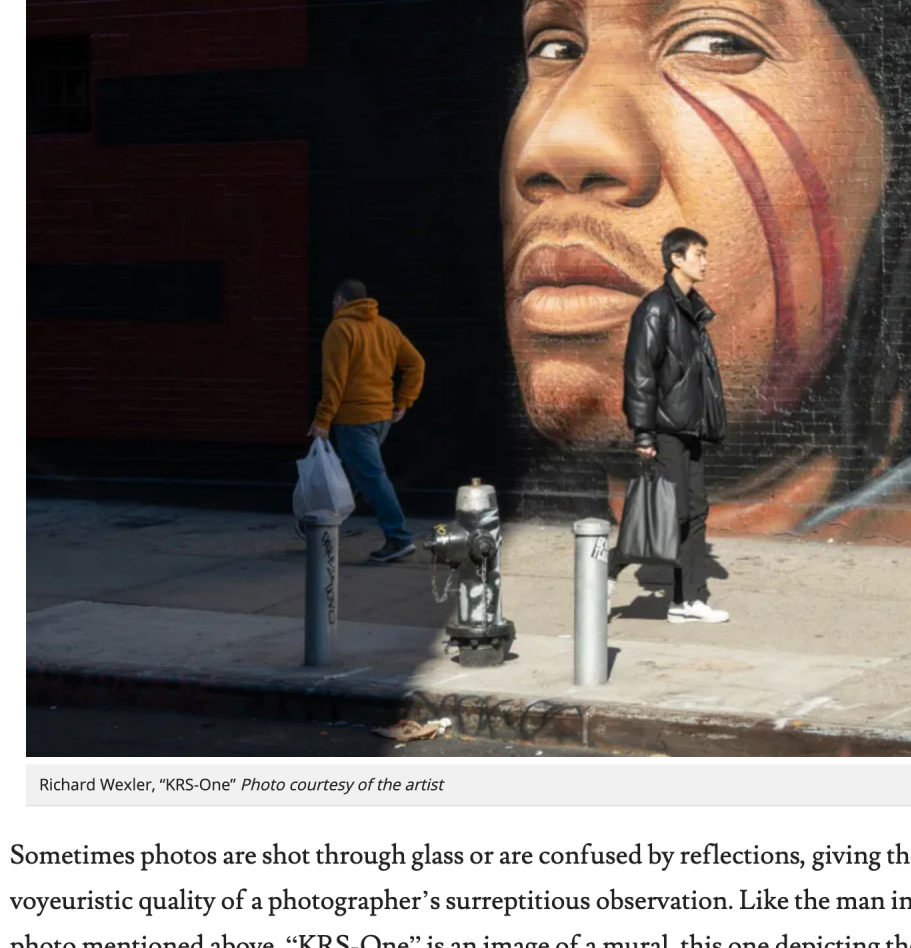
"Subway Ride #1" depicts the way people often concentrate their gaze in various directions – the floor, the train's window, the ads above the seat – anywhere but on their fellow passengers. It's another way of conjuring solitude among the multitudes.



Richard Wexler, "KRS-One" *Photo courtesy of the artist*

Sometimes photos are shot through glass or are confused by reflections, giving them the voyeuristic quality of a photographer's surreptitious observation. Like the man in the Paris photo mentioned above, "KRS-One" is an image of a mural, this one depicting the eponymous rapper, photographed from inside the plate glass window of a building across the street. The musician stares confrontationally directly at the viewer, creating tension that a young man, walking past it and lost in his own thoughts, appears completely oblivious to.

There are shots of altercations ("Street Drama," in which one man pulls at another who looks ready to punch a third man); street fashion ("Two Women Walking Midtown," one of them dressed in attention-getting animal-print hat and coat with checked stretch pants and an arty handbag); and various photographs of Manhattanites huddled against cold or shielding themselves from rain under umbrellas.



Richard Wexler, "Red Umbrella in Snow" *Photo courtesy of the artist*

Wexler's primary tool is his cellphone, except for "KRS" and a view of the High Line, which were both shot with his Nikon camera. He may "lightly edit" his images digitally, but only to refine, not distort, the truth of the moment he is capturing. Sometimes the results are magically confounding, as in "Red Umbrella in Snow," which looks like a black-and-white photograph where we might assume said umbrella has been touched up with a bit of rouge.

But like many street photographers who staked out at a vantage point for hours waiting for "the decisive moment" (a term coined by Cartier-Bresson), this was not the case. Wexler waited about 30 minutes until this woman with the red umbrella wandered into the frame. In this way, Haskell's and Wexler's shows find an oblique connection, apprehending moments – interior and exterior – that represent, as Haskell says, "the astonishing gift of being human," in its infinite variability.

Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland. He can be reached at: jorge@jsarango.com

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