

*“Give a girl a good pair of shoes and she can conquer the world.”*

— MARILYN MONROE

## If the shoe fits: ‘Partners’ a pleasure to see

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REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

There’s nothing like a good shoe to make a woman feel:

- A. Beautiful
- B) Empowered
- C) Indebted
- D) Imprisoned

Or, perhaps, for artist Claudia DeMonte, “E: All of the above.”

Shoes, for the feminist artist, are as much about vigor as they are about victimization. They are amulet and lodestone, accessory and affliction, control and confinement.

Shoes are not the only totemic objects with which DeMonte plays, but they often operate as a canvas for her: a fetish and a fascination. Shoes are objects that bolster and bind, heighten and empower. They are as ever-present and utilitarian as the whisk broom and dustpan — and as symbolically freighted.

The Mattatuck’s small but worthwhile exhibit “Partners: Claudia DeMonte and Ed McGowin,” presents many of DeMonte’s domestically charged works and it’s a pleasure to see



CONTRIBUTED

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**Claudia DeMonte's Female Fetish, 1996-2010, wood, pewter, paint**

# SHOES: Domestic inspiration

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them alongside those of her husband, McGowin, with whom DeMonte shares an obvious affinity for objects and their allusive power. Both artists tilt to an arch (pun intended) sensibility, leavened with a deep reverence for the talismanic qualities of things, which they juxtapose and adorn with flourishes that are as amusing as they are accusatory.

For DeMonte, who came of age with the feminist movement, aspersion came first. Her early work plucked items out of the distaff domestic sphere, then deified and demonized them. So, the grunge work of domesticity — brooms, vacuums, aprons and the like — became totemic objects to flog and to skewer. What were a pair of shoes, after all, but a way to draw a man's gaze while debilitate a woman's agency? So her shoes — simple low-heeled black pumps — became canvases on which to weld her dreams and underscore her burdens.

The objects of domesticity — coffee pots or toasters — became symbols of imprisonment on which she would graffiti her aspirations. She did this largely with pewter ("the poor man's silver") symbols, fastened onto wooden black objects, like shoes or dust pans. Sauce pans meet globes; pitchers meet suitcases; jets soared through the pet dog. Dreams met drudgery. Fantasies wrestled with obligations. And all of it served to underscore the duality and ambiguity of being a woman.

DeMonte's "Female Fetish" (1996-2010) is a wonderful assemblage of many of these oppositional conversations in which DeMonte has become so fluent. What will grab viewers are the flashy accessories festooned to the objects, a theme DeMonte takes up differently in her "Women's World," (1996), a larger, quilt-like presentation of many of these themes.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Ed McGowin's works exploring racial identity and history, like 'Dr. King,' are part of the 'Partners' exhibit at the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury through April 26.



The work of Claudia DeMonte is on view at the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury through April.

The sense a viewer gets with these pieces is the neither/nor dialogue that percolates through the artist's work. *Things*, particularly of the domestic variety, are not just banal, but inhabited with an iconic, sacramental power.

McGowin funnels his own inheritance of the American south into thoughtful, pungent mixed media works that

explore the blending of the black and white cultures as a way to reconcile issues like racial oppression and cultural appropriation.

His alter ego "T.M. Dossett" explores freighted legacies, like that of the death of civil rights activist Medgar Evers. These works — black felt on white muslin, explode with the convergence of con-

## IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** "Partners: Claudia DeMonte and Ed McGowin"

**WHERE:** Mattatuck Museum, 144 W. Main St., Waterbury

**WHEN:** through April 22

**HOW:** visit [mattmuseum.org](http://mattmuseum.org) or call 203-753-0381

flict and victimization, cruelty and rhapsody. These are powerfully rhythmic works that produced incredible unease. Like "Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis," a large work of carved and painted wood figures, McGowin weaves history, symbols and cultural imagery with a sense of confusion and complicity.

In McGowin's work, cartoonish figures of rock n' roll figures, preachers, choirs, devils, performers and pianos thread together like black-and-white branches of the same tree.