

Words of art

Foster winner delivers with text

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

There's a photograph hidden in Andrew Witkin's exhibit at LaMontagne Gallery. It's a print made from a scan of a Polaroid, and it depicts, in case you can't discern the image through so many generations, a dried rose. Witkin has placed a list over it, bits of text responding to "Nuestros Desaparecidos," a documentary about victims of political oppression in Buenos Aires: "faces of old friends," "no longer far away," "to be silent."

Witkin was awarded the Institute of Contemporary Art's \$25,000 James and Audrey Foster Prize last month; his work, along with that of three other finalists, is up at the ICA until March 1. The LaMontagne exhibit, called "Others Among Others" because Witkin invites collaboration, makes a lovely companion to his ICA installation. Both are visually spare, freighted with tenderness and the constancy of loss.

The installation here — chairs and tables made of birch plywood, scraps of old papers, a pale pile of alabaster, stones, ping-pong balls, cork, a stereo playing versions of an old folk song, and three racks of 144 cotton T-shirts, each stamped with text — is terrifically unassuming.

That's partly because Witkin wonders, in his work, where his daily life meets his art. The text on the T-shirts comes from the artist, from his friends, and from his reading. As it says on one of the T-shirts, "What's for public and what is private? Of private, what should be referenced or pointed out as existing/exciting?"

The private, of course, is the source of the rich undercurrent of emotion indicated in music and text here more than in imagery. Another T-shirt says "group photo but with description of only one person." Then there's "little bits of bitterness



PHOTO COURTESY

Andrew Witkin stamped 144 cotton T-shirts with phrases such as "little bits of bitterness about the ending"

about the ending." It's not all on the cusp of sentiment; there's also "ironing board." The T-shirts read, all together, like a poem, a gradual, resonant accrual of images and ideas.

That hidden image of the rose — not a live rose, but a dried one — suggests such a depth of feeling that it must be held at a distance to even begin to comprehend it. That gulf between feeling and understanding is this artist's terrain. His careful mapping of that terrain, in which he

hides roses rather than foisting them upon us, leaves room for us to chart our own private emotional topography. That's why Witkin's art has power: It's capacious, welcoming, and sad.