University of Rhode Island art history students got a taste of the "disunion" of Civil War era art yesterday evening, at an interactive lesson and discussion with Curator of American Art at Amherst College’s Mead Art Museum, Randy Griffey.

Griffey presented at the Fine Arts Center to a small group of students, who he immediately asked to sit closer to the projector so participants could get a closer look at the artwork and share their own opinions and interpretation on the pieces.

The work Griffey discussed is all featured in an exhibition at the Mead Art Museum, focusing on American art produced during the Civil War. The exhibition, entirely drawn from Mead’s own collection of paintings, photographs, prints and sculptures, marks the 150-year anniversary of the onset of the Civil War.

The issues the collection presents, of race and representation, are all topics URI students in 19th century art history classes have been discussing this semester, assistant professor Pamela J. Warner said. As such, many students were quick to offer their own interpretations and discuss slides of featured portions of the collection with Griffey.

The works Griffey presented all offered up images of America separated by the issue of slavery. In particular, a painting by a Boston-area 19th century artist, William Rimmer, sparked a discussion of images of liberty. The painting itself was one Griffey noted many students might not be familiar with, but he allowed the participants to work out the meaning behind the art themselves.

The painting depicts, as Griffey affably described, a "big bearded dude," attacking a vulnerable woman, dressed in red, white and blue, shielding a sickly baby from his sword. The painting is a depiction of the Biblical Massacre of the Innocents (in which the Bible says King Herod ordered the death of every newborn infant in an attempt to kill an infant Jesus), essentially an "overall pretty bad day," Griffey joked.

However, like many of the works Griffey presented, Rimmer's painting is more than meets the eye. As Griffey noted, "it's not rocket science," as the vulnerable woman and child represent liberty and an America besieged by the terrors of slavery. In fact, King Herod was a synonym during the 19th century for someone who was evil—such as saying Warner had "out Herod's Herod" by giving a difficult exam, Griffey joked. The abolitionist movement invoked Herod's image to demonize Southern slave owners.

Griffey showed multiple other instances of the "subversive use of national iconography," such as images
of African American mothers shielding their children from an attacking eagle near the steps of the Capitol building.

All of these images worked together, as one student noted, to make the issue of slavery "hit home" for many Americans, particularly those in the north—showing not just the emotional impact of slavery on African American families, but how it would act as the downfall of American civilization as a whole, Griffey said.

The hands-on discussion ended with a famous painting by Eastman Johnson depicting slave life in the South—a piece that 19th century pro-slavery and abolitionists alike rallied around. Students and art history professors in the audience were all able to offer their thoughts for a group discussion of potential meanings of the artwork, to end the hour-long presentation.

The "Disunion! American Art During the Civil War," exhibition will be on display at the Mead Art Museum until Dec. 11.