DEBBIE HESSE admits she’s a latecomer to Facebook.

“I guess I’d be called the digital immigrant and my kids are the digital natives,” said Ms. Hesse, who in addition to being a mother to three teenagers is an installation artist and the director of artistic services and programs for the Arts Council of Greater New Haven.

She said she was a lot like others in the late boomer generation, “trying to learn how to not be left in the dust with the new technology.” But she may be ahead of the pack in employing social networking as the theme for an art show.

“I didn’t even know how other artists were using it when I had the idea,” she said. “I was curious.”

That curiosity has yielded “Status Update,” an exhibition named for Facebook’s popular communication format.
Nearly 50 works from more than a dozen artists will be on display through Aug. 1 at Haskins Laboratories in New Haven, a private nonprofit group affiliated with Yale and the University of Connecticut that specializes in communication: mainly speech, language and reading research.

Haskins has held exhibitions with the arts council for several years, but this one was designed specifically to dovetail with its mission, which now includes research on student learning in a digital age.

As a direct result of the show, Philip Rubin, chief executive of Haskins, started a Facebook page for Haskins. “There’s money and fun and excitement to be made” if art can manage to stay abreast of technological innovation, he said. “But you’ve got to have a little sense of style, art and design in this thing.”

“Status Update” has turned out to be a somewhat unlikely intersection of digital concepts and conventional art.

Ms. Hesse curated the show almost entirely through Facebook, with the help of Donna Ruff, a Brooklyn artist. She found two categories there, she said: “Artists that are using it as a medium, performing in it, using it as poetry, using it as a canvas. And then artists that are commenting on it as a new form and creating new dialogues about what this means in our lives.”

In the former category is a piece by Rachel Perry Welty done on an iPhone into which the artist entered a status update every minute for 16 hours, and another by Lee Walton that is a series of about 50 videos illustrating status update posts from his friends. In the latter category are paintings and drawings that use social networking as inspiration, like the series of decidedly old-media abstract paintings by Cat Balco that are meant to represent communication at the cellular level.

Between the two categories are people like Ms. Hesse, whose string installation uses the idea behind Facebook’s “friend wheel” feature to represent connections made through the show, and Keith Johnson of Hamden, who did not use the very thing that is central to his art — a camera — to make his two photographic entries. Both Mr. Johnson’s pieces, “99 KJS” and “18 Domiciles,” are compilations of images from Google.

“A couple of years ago, for some reason, I went to Google Images and typed in my name to see what images of mine were floating around the ether,” Mr. Johnson said. What he found were images of lots of people also named Keith Johnson. He used 99 of them — including himself — in the piece. “18 Domiciles” is a series of Google Earth representations of all the places he has lived.

Mr. Johnson, 60, says that as long as he does not give up the kind of observation he believes is critical in photography, he will experiment in the digital, social networking world, but that he is not sold on it.

“It’s easy and it’s curious and it’s a different take on what photography is,” he said. “I’m much more interested in making pictures than sitting in front of a computer.”

Matt Held, a Brooklyn artist who has become something of a Facebook phenomenon...
through his oil paintings of Facebook photos, is already worried that his success will
typecast him. He has done about 50 paintings since late last year. The subject gets a digital
photo of the portrait and the right of first refusal to buy it. But he is cutting himself off at
200, despite having more than 3,700 requests and, as he says, "source material to last me
till the cows come home."

"Most social network sites — they're hot for a while," he said. "I don't want to be the guy
doing Facebook portraits when they're not relevant anymore."

Like many artists, Mr. Held, 37, finds Facebook and the Web invaluable for keeping up
with other artists and their activities as well as providing a virtual gallery. But as art, the
medium is not always clear.

"Is it art to do art on an iPhone and put it on an easel?" he asked. "If you go back to
Duchamp and put a toilet on the wall — is it art? Yes, it is."

Jeremiah Teipen's "Social Network" explores what he calls the "visual gluttony of the Web"
in a video that cascades with rapidly changing multiple images gathered from Google Image
searches.

"That's very much what people do with social networking sites," said Mr. Teipen, 34, who
is making a career out of new-media art. Artists are "curating the Web with quotes from
someone, with song lyrics they like, video they found, a photo they thought was funny. It
expresses identity through found media."

Identity through social media is also the core of An Xiao's work. Trained in philosophy,
Ms. Xiao, 25, came to art through photography, writing and an interest in communication
that goes back to her childhood, when she wrote letters to her grandmother in the
Philippines. The letters, she said, related little moments that add up to a portrait of the
writer, the way social networking does now with a series of — as she put it — "totally inane
things."

Her installation, called "Nothing to Tweet Home About," is a group of postcards written as
Twitter feeds that she is mailing to the gallery. "Sometimes I take the slow bus just to get a
seat. And talk on the phone," she wrote on one from New York.

"The mediums change," she said in a telephone interview. "But the basic human need to
communicate, to share your life and talk about your life — that's going to be there forever."

"Status Update" is at Haskins Laboratories, 300 George Street, Ninth Floor, New
Haven, through Aug. 1, Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (203) 772-2788;
newhavensocialarts.org/programs/exhibitions.

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