

Museums

In the galleries: At Hamiltonian, a birthday celebration of a different sort

By Mark Jenkins
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Every year since 2011, art professor [Naoko Wowsugi](#) has asked her students to give her an experience for her birthday. The request is not an expression of narcissism — well, not entirely — but an assignment, first at Virginia Commonwealth University and more recently at American University. Some of the supposed highlights of this exercise [are on display](#) at Hamiltonian Gallery, along with a video of a birthday event choreographed by Whoop Dee Doo, a performance-art duo.

The idea for “Assignment: Happy Birthday” may sound odd, but some of the show’s ingredients are routine. Balloons and confetti litter the floor, piles of gift boxes line the wall and birthday cake appears as both a massive sculptural prop and — in a smaller, softer form — something student Toby Nguyen pushed in her prof’s face. Such gestures are documented in photos or videos, so gallery-goers can watch, for example, Wowsugi’s first listen of the electronic music that Tim Hoyt composed for her.

There’s always one apple-polisher who makes a bigger play than everyone else. Wowsugi was born in Japan, where her family has lived for several generations, but her heritage is Korean. So HwaJin Shin enlisted family and friends to travel to her teacher’s ancestral home in South Korea and plant a ginkgo tree. This gift may have gone literally too far, but shouldn’t art overreach?

The implicit hostility of some students’ responses is understandable, and it didn’t stop with in-your-face cake splats. [Randall Lear](#) made his professor into an aesthetic assassin, giving her a bag and asking her to throw it off a roof as often as she liked. It turned out that the bag contained the art he had made as a student. Erin Nanney staged a death ceremony for Wowsugi, at which the teacher’s presence was ignored. This idea is more disturbing if you know (did Nanney?) that mock funerals are among the vicious ploys of Japan’s notorious school bullies.

Wowsugi contributed no art to the show, but it could be argued that she has devised a new version of the venerable artistic practice of employing a workshop of assistants. As a learning experience, though, her assignment seems dubious. Can subversion really be taught in a classroom? Rather than wish her students “happy birthday,” perhaps the professor should echo the motto of onetime Harvard lecturer Timothy Leary: “Turn on, tune in, drop out.”

Naoko Wowsugi + Whoop Dee Doo: “Assignment: Happy Birthday” On view through Feb. 14 at Hamiltonian Gallery, 1353 U St. NW, Suite 101. 202-332-1116. www.hamiltoniangallery.com.

José Gómez

A neo-expressionist with Cartesian tendencies, José Gómez paints loosely but often partitions his pictures into rectangles. A gently surrealistic depiction of a suit jacket made of neckties is literally split among four canvases, but more typically the Peruvian artist uses quadrilateral shapes to divide a single-panel scene. In his show at P Street Gallerie, human figures are glimpsed through dozens of small windowpanes, or stretched across the spines of a hundred or more books. Sometimes the splayed central image echoes familiar compositions, borrowed from Picasso, Manet, Velasquez and others.

Gómez also has a more naturalistic side, showcased in beach and street scenes that portray mushroom-like umbrellas or spindly unattended bicycles. Both types of paintings emphasize sunny and earthy tones — yellows, oranges and browns — and are embellished with random spatters and free brushstrokes. However calculated their format, Gómez's paintings have a spontaneous feel.

José Gómez On view through Feb. 15 at *P Street Gallerie*, 3235 P St. NW. 202-333-4868.
www.pstreetgallerie.com.

Michael Gessner and Joanne Kent

Nature guides local artists Michael Gessner and Joanne Kent, but it leads them down different paths. Although both are showing wall sculptures in the exhibition “Unearthed/Unleashed,” at the Athenaeum, the stylistic overlap is minimal. Gessner's wood-and-paper pieces are outsized yet delicate, emulating the forms of leaves and insects. Kent's abstractions pay homage to nature principally through color and texture. Most often, the artist makes notched, round-cornered plywood squares that are layered horizontally with paint and wax; the simulated grain suggests weathered stone and craggy tree trunks.

The most direct of Gessner's sculptures resemble supersized actual leaves and rely on the contrast between subtle details and unexpected scale. But he also constructs more complex, less literal works that mingle twigs and tendrils, leaves and wings. Such works as “Amphibious” and “Lucent Snail” are marvels of symbolic bio-engineering.

Kent sometimes adds geometric shapes, such as the curves and circles in her “Etude Series.” The fifth in the sequence includes bright orange dots, which in this muted context are a little shocking. But her usual palette conjures a forest in winter, a congenial environment for Gessner's hybrid creatures.

Unearthed/Unleashed: Michael Gessner and Joanne Kent On view through Feb. 22 at the *Athenaeum*, 201 Prince St., Alexandria. 703-548-0035. www.nvfaa.org.

Tai Hwa Goh

Paper leaves also feature in “Lulled Land,” an installation at Flashpoint Gallery by Seoul-bred Tai Hwa Goh, a onetime Washingtonian who now teaches in New Jersey. Unlike Michael Gessner, however, Goh cultivates faux foliage in profusion. She layers printed images of plants on circles of diaphanous parchment, waxed so they glimmer. Likenesses of flowers grow from the floor, and representations of water drip from pipes protruding from the wall. A solitary bloom in a simple vase isn’t Goh’s thing; although the installation includes much open space, it’s closer to a jungle than a formal green.

The floral imagery and techniques of making, printing and folding paper are rooted in East Asian artistic traditions, yet “Lulled Land” isn’t all dainty and refined. Goh incorporates lengths of foam pool noodles, and an utterly ordinary glass window juts from one wall. Somewhere between a Buddhist temple garden and the tropical fantasies of naive painter Henri Rousseau, fragments of American suburbia brashly invade Goh’s land.

Tai Hwa Goh: “Lulled Land” On view through Feb. 21 at Flashpoint Gallery, 916 G St. NW. 202-315-1305. www.culturaldc.org/visual-arts/flashpoint-gallery.

Jenkins is a freelance writer.

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