

Museums

In the galleries: Semi-fictional streetscapes resemble stage sets

By Mark Jenkins
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The title piece of Leigh Merrill's show at Flashpoint Gallery, "This Place," was shown last year at Target Gallery. There, the digitally composed image of an anonymous pink commercial building looked like a comment on the cultural desolation of American suburbia. But many of the altered photographs in this show, produced by the same technique, give the blankness of "This Place" a continental accent. The Texas artist hasn't eliminated all the signs, and the ones that remain are in French.

If Merrill's unpeopled, semi-fictional streetscapes resemble stage sets, they're not entirely barren. One picture focuses on a large, folded umbrella, and another features graffiti and sculptures of a lion and elephant. Yet the overall impression is of vacancy and wan color. One set of pictures, titled "Pink," "White" and "Blue," suggests a pastel version of the French tricolor. The effect is not ominous — the city doesn't seem to have been emptied by anything terrible — but it is slightly eerie.

Merrill makes stylistically similar images in which feathers and candy are scattered on white backdrops. Their opposites are large-format digital collages such as "Leaves," dense arrangements of flowers and greenery. After walking the color-drained boulevards of the artist's imaginary Francophone town, it's a pleasure to turn into this fecund garden.

Leigh Merrill: This Place On view through Feb. 13 at Flashpoint Gallery, 916 G St. NW. 202-315-1305. culturaldc.org/visual-arts/flashpoint-gallery.

Mutations

Pam Rogers depicts, and sometimes actually uses, leaves and blooms in her art. Bonner Sale's raw ingredients are cartoons, monster movies and video games. The two local artists' work hangs on facing walls, making for an odd dialogue, in Civilian Art Project's "Mutations," which also includes an installation by Stephanie Williams.

Sale's gouache paintings on paper evoke childhood with both their fantasy/adventure scenarios and their toy-store hues. Many of the portrayed creatures are mutants of a sort and clearly threatening. A boy's fantasies of bravely defeating such menaces, Sale writes, apply to adult struggles with "moral conflict and disharmony." As art rather than metaphor, though, these pictures may not appeal to viewers with grown-up tastes.

If Rogers's approach is subtler, that's partially because her palette comes from nature. Her abstract yet clearly botanical drawings incorporate soil, tannins and plant pigments as well as pencil and ink, and the centerpiece

of her show is a massive wall piece of leaves, pods, flowers and such. These materials are assembled in packets and wrapped in gauze, as if to become talismans or herbal remedies. They demonstrate the human tendency to plunder the natural, yet also curiosity and even awe at its abundance and beauty.

Williams also contributed an installation, but one that sprawls aggressively off the wall. Her assemblage includes found objects and upholstered pink fabric objects akin to body parts. It proposes mutation as liberating, Williams writes: “a potential queering against expected ideas of self.”

Mutations On view through Feb. 13 at Civilian Art Projects, 4718 14th St. NW. 202-607-3804.
civilianartprojects.com.

Rob Hackett

D.C. sculptor Rob Hackett is known for suspending burly wooden beams in midair, as if they were feathers caught in an updraft. Most of his pieces in “Mode(s),” at Hamiltonian Gallery, take a more conventional posture. Five floor-to-ceiling pillars pretend to support the room’s ceiling; they’re rectangular and made of light wood, although notches at differing heights reveal inner metal bars that appear to be structural.

While these minimal constructions mimic architecture, two other sculptures evoke the biological. They curve from floor to wall and are segmented like a human spine or a centipede’s sections. These pieces could be wooden approximations of part of a whale’s skeleton, but they also suggest — especially when walking through them — the vault of a cathedral (or a Metro station). Stripped to pure form, the ribs of a mammal or of a building are curiously similar.

Rob Hackett: Mode(s) On view through Feb. 13 at Hamiltonian Gallery, 1353 U St. NW. Suite 101. 202-332-1116. hamiltoniangallery.com.

Michiyo Mizuuchi

and Yang-ja Lee

Local artists Michiyo Mizuuchi and Yang-ja Lee have much in common. The two women grew up in Japan, and both are research scientists at the National Institutes of Health. The art in “Wind From the East,” their Waverly Street Gallery show, also shares something. Although Mizuuchi is a painter and Lee a potter, both employ brushstroke-like gestures that recall Asian calligraphy.

Mizuuchi works in several modes, including impressionist watercolor and abstract collage-paintings that are thickly layered. More calligraphic are pictures made with diluted acrylic pigment, such as “Hagoromo,” a watery field punctuated by a vertical gray stroke. The artist is more concerned with color than line, but such gestures both focus her compositions and link to venerable ink-painting technique.

Fluid black lines embellish Lee's elegant vases, bowls and teapots, which are more rooted in tradition than Mizuuchi's work. The finishes, sumptuous yet earthy, are faithful to the aesthetic of the tea ceremony. Most of the pieces are named for Japanese places, but Lee's titles can be as whimsical as her ceramics. "Three Musketeers" is a set of tiny teapots sized for mice rather than for swashbucklers.

Wind From the East: Michiyo Mizuuchi and Yang-ja Lee On view through Feb. 6 at Waverly Street Gallery, 4600 East-West Hwy., Bethesda. 301-951-9441. waverlystreetgallery.com.

Mixed prints

Nature scenes and cityscapes are well represented in the Old Print Gallery's "Mixed Winter Show," an eclectic 23-artist selection that spans nearly a century. The earliest piece is Albert W. Barker's moody black-and-white 1928 lithograph of the Catskills at nightfall; the most recent is Matt Brown's 2015 portrayal of a wave's crash on the rocky Maine coast, notable for a subtle range of blues and exceptional detail for a woodcut.

Rockwell Kent's streamlined style is represented by two 1930s wood engravings, and Michael Di Cerbo's geometric urban scene has a similarly art-deco feel, although it was made about 70 years later.

Despite all the stylistic and thematic connections, a few artists don't mix in. Chief among them are Jake Muirhead, whose "Pine Cone" is precise yet impressionistic, and Heather McMordie, whose colorful abstractions are bold, free and almost painterly.

Mixed Winter Show On view through Feb. 12 at the Old Print Gallery, 1220 31st St. NW. 202-965-1818. oldprintgallery.com.

Jenkins is a freelance writer.

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