

In the galleries: The American character, as molded by 11 female artists

By Mark Jenkins

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As might be expected of a show that includes twinned miniatures of the Statue of Liberty, “US: Emerging Voices in Clay” addresses the American character. Or perhaps that should be characters. New Yorker Natalie Arbalez’s unheroic brown-clay replicas represent just one of the perspectives in the 11-woman exhibit at District Clay Gallery.

Curated by Philadelphia ceramicist Roberto Lugo, “US” reaches across the country and into various heritages. It also includes artists who combine clay with unusual and sometimes inelegant materials.

A good example of all those attributes is Jennifer Ling Datchuk, a Chinese American Texan. She contributes a jump-rope whose ceramic handles are linked by a long braid of straight black hair, as well as a white porcelain Buddha who laughs as children climb on him. The latter appears traditional, but the climbers are girls rather than boys, as is customary of such figures in China.

Raven Halfmoon, originally from Oklahoma, draws on American Indian lore for the show’s most mythic piece: a black wolf with human hands protruding from its mouth. Christina Erives recalls the Mexican foodways of her L.A. upbringing with ceramic facsimiles such as a series of fried eggs. Philadelphia’s Amanda Schneider marries old and new with vases whose style emulates ancient Greece but that illustrate contemporary mating rituals.

The most potent contrasts of craft, theme and materials are in Natalie Kuenzi’s garden of porcelain roses, woven into a quilt of plastic strands found on Philly streets. The flowers are white, gray or black, while the castoff synthetic fibers boast a rainbow of hues. Not content to choke Mother Nature, plastic trash also plunders her colors.

US: Emerging Voices in Clay Through Sept. 23 at [District Clay Gallery](#), 2414 Douglas St. NE.

Terrell and Nzinga

On first look, the Afrofuturist paintings of James Terrell and Zsundayka Nzinga appear more similar than different. The married artists, whose “Born at the Bottom of the Ship” is at Honfleur Gallery, both make portraits with vivid colors and bold patterns. Forms are often outlined in black lines, so the compositions resemble stained-glass windows, but with the giddiness of psychedelic posters. Although most of the subjects aren’t identified, Terrell’s include Jimi Hendrix and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

The local duo's one collaboration depicts a woman with a massive blue-green Afro festooned with flowers. The picture's large blocks of bright color are more characteristic of Terrell, while the realistic touches, including the brown skin tones, are typical of Nzinga. Her paintings are often darker, with more areas of black and near-photographic details punctuating the stylized whole. Where Terrell incorporates complex patterns that suggest ritual body paint, Nzinga uses simpler ones akin to fabric stitching.

But in a sense both artists sew scraps together. Their subject is the identity of people who are, as a gallery note says, "uniquely African American while also being considered neither." There's a sense of fragmentation, but the pieces are reassembled with vigor and flair.

Born at the Bottom of the Ship: An Exploration of the Culture of Being Black in America Through Sept. 15 at Honfleur Gallery, 1241 Good Hope Rd. SE.

Helina Metaferia

On visits to the National Gallery of Art, Helina Metaferia doesn't simply accept the worldview the institution represents. The artist, a native Washingtonian of Ethiopian lineage, responds viscerally. In three videos in "Refiguring the Canon," her Hamiltonian Gallery show, she performs in front of works at the National Gallery or the Massachusetts

Museum of Contemporary Art. By asserting her presence, she challenges the accepted story of Western greatness.

In addition to swaying skeptically through the halls of culture, Metaferia inserts herself into art history by covering one of Hamiltonian's walls with collaged copies of art magazines, all from the 1980s, the decade in which she was born. She sticks Afrocentrists's quotations on the wall and pastes pictures of her own eyes over those of Art News' famous-artist cover subjects.

Such subversions are actually in the Western mainstream, or at least one rivulet of it. Marcel Duchamp, the godfather of artistic pranksters, is known for drawing a mustache on a Mona Lisa copy. The difference is that Metaferia uses her own face and body to represent more than just herself. She's dancing for everyone who has been excluded.

***Refiguring the Canon* Through Sept. 15 at Hamiltonian Gallery, 1353 U St. NW.**

LA Johnson

Tigers lurk in high grass, and boaters paddle on a river that's actually a snake. These are among the magical realist scenarios in LA Johnson's "Future Ghosts," but her Lost Origins Gallery show is mostly populated by female nudes in balletic poses. These elementary figures, which suggest the influence of Henri Matisse's cutouts, are often grouped in interlocking arrangements. Their individuality is conveyed by skin tones that include not only pink and brown, but also green, orange and fuchsia.

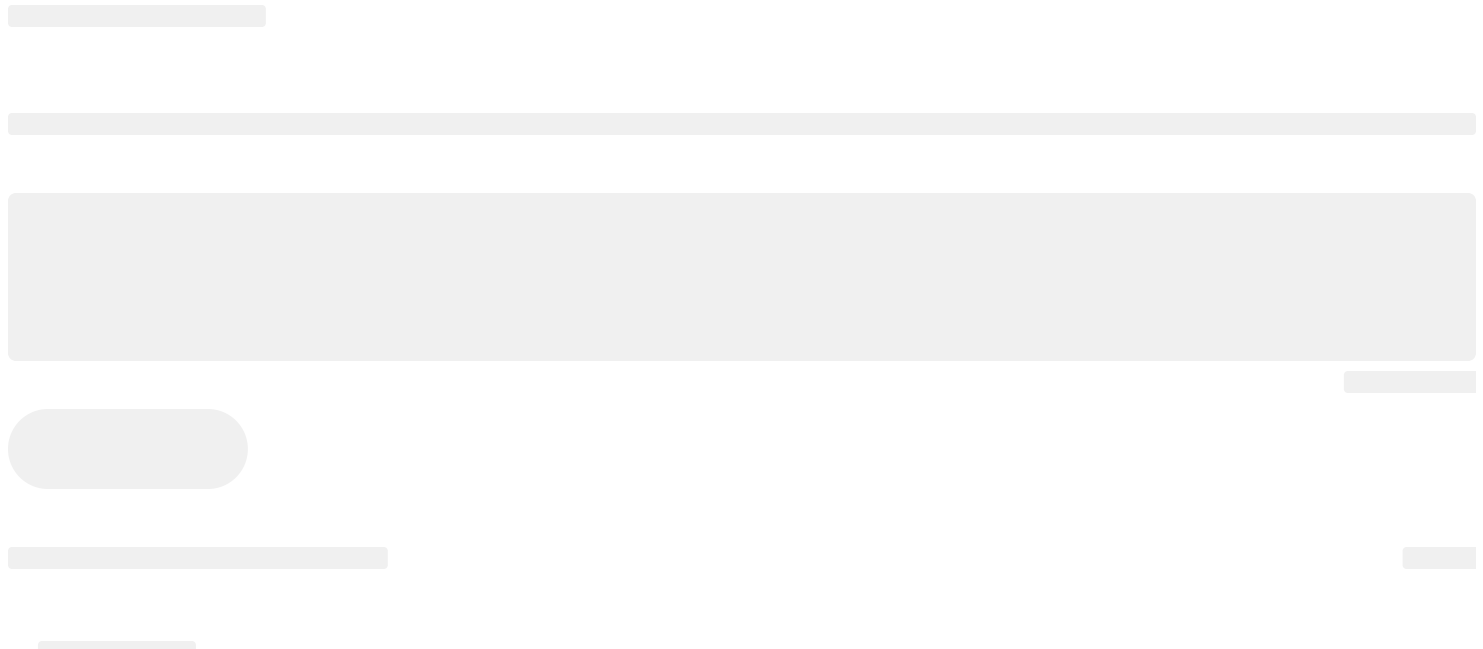
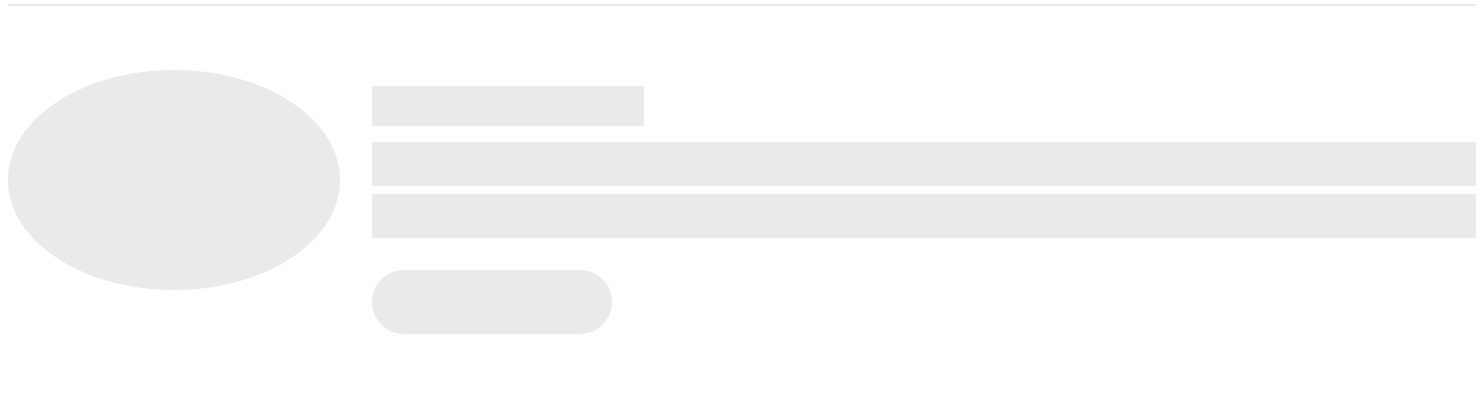
This is the first solo show for Johnson, who does illustrations for NPR's website and organizes pop-up exhibitions. She's showing a few acrylic paintings on canvas, but most of the pictures were rendered on paper in gouache, a water-based paint that allows the spontaneity of watercolor while offering more vivid hues. There's nothing spectral about Johnson's subjects, whose earthy vitality combines with a neon-bright palette. The future ghosts are full of life.

***LA Johnson: Future Ghosts* Through Sept. 22 at Lost Origins Gallery, 2110 Mt. Pleasant St. NW**

Tom Walsh

Among the hallmarks of Tom Walsh’s abstractions, according to the title of his Martha Spak Gallery show, are “Rhythmic Lines With Distinction.” A more evocative term would be streaks, which conveys the wateriness of the local artist’s gestures. He alternates between horizontal and vertical and sometimes bisects his works or places boxes within boxes. What holds the eye, though, are the fluid details, translucent colors and mineral-like textures. His pictures are geometric in format, but their most appealing nuances appear organic.

Rhythmic Lines With Distinction Through Sept. 24 at *Martha Spak Gallery, 40 District Sq. SW.*



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