

In the galleries: Some art is sultry, while other pieces are smoky

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By Mark Jenkins

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A quick glance around the main gallery at IA&A at Hillyer doesn't reveal much that would have surprised museum-goers a century ago. "Flesh + Bone III," the latest of the venue's periodic surveys of figurative art, includes a lot of female nudes and near-nudes, painted in styles that are contemporary but hardly confrontational. A closer look, though, reveals a few pieces that are ready to rumble.

Chief among them is Rebecca Finelli's "Precious Members," a set of realistic paintings of male and female genitalia nestled in the sort of ornate frames usually reserved for vintage family snapshots. The series is near another close-up, Michael Bach's more discreet photo of a hand on a thigh on a bathtub, the rest of the body under the water or outside the frame. In both works, the parts upstage the whole.

Other contributors kink their straightforward renderings toward the surreal. Sean De's "Minotaur" is a portrait of an otherwise ordinary child with a horn protruding from his head. Orion Wertz's "Under the Spillway" depicts three people on a wooden trestle, tranquil except for the aggressively teeming aquatic life below them. For these artists, strangeness is in the details.

Among the sculptures are Cristian Ianculescu's sleekly stylized bust, "The Old Revolutionary," and a sort of anti-bust: Yeon Ji Yoo's "Distant Landscape," a plaster-and-cardboard hybrid whose human lower half is topped by a teetering shantytown. If we are where we live, this creature has a vividly split personality.

Madeline A. Stratton also conflates the personal and the architectural in her adjacent show, "What We Forgot to Remember." The D.C. artist's wall-mounted sculptures employ housing forms and materials, notably wooden frames and fabric-covered walls. Stratton also uses thread to define shapes that hang in the constructions' open spaces. The goal, she writes, is to "convey both absence and belonging."

Nancy Sausser, whose "Quotidian Shift" show occupies the third gallery, takes a different approach to inside and outside. The forms of her ceramic sculptures resemble leaves and seed pods as well as human organs, fusing the natural worlds within and without. Painted blue and white, with some areas left clay brown, the

sculptures are paired with mirrors, submerged in water or hung in an array that suggests an animist chapel. The shapes may be quotidian, but the effect is exalted.

Flesh + Bone III; Nancy Sausser: Quotidian Shift; Madeline A. Stratton: What We Forgot to Remember Through July 28 at IA&A at Hillyer, 9 Hillyer Ct. NW.

Marco Hernandez

Above his sumptuously detailed rendering of a Mayan ruin, Marco Hernandez places a floating man, apparently himself. That's one way the printmaker puts the "me" into "Mi Viaje y las Batallas/My Journey and the Battles," his show at Washington Printmakers Gallery. The Mexico-born Kansas artist interjects himself into the Mexican Revolution or sites that existed long before European colonization of the Americas.

Hernandez makes Goya-like etchings, using painstaking classical methods to meld reality and fantasy. The prints are in black-and-white, but some feature bits of hand-coloring to spotlight whimsical and often anachronistic details: Meso-Americans water their crops with Super Soakers, or rebels answer gunfire with water balloons. When the artist depicts Pancho Villa in the custody of soldiers in contemporary garb, the added color is blood red.

In one symbolic scenario, a skeleton wearing a conquistador's helmet watches as a firing squad trains its rifles on the outlined shapes of Mexico, Spain and other countries of the Hispanic realm. The image derives much of its power from Hernandez's mastery of a Europe-rooted technique. As a weapon, intaglio is more formidable than a water balloon.

Marco Hernandez: Mi Viaje y las Batallas/My Journey and the Battles Through July 28 at Washington Printmakers Gallery, 1641 Wisconsin Ave. NW.

Dennis Lee Mitchell

Trained as a ceramist, Dennis Lee Mitchell has long worked with fire. But putting shaped clay in a kiln is less risky than the local artist's current project: applying an acetylene torch to paper. Each of the pictures in "Smoke Drawings," his show at Gallery Neptune & Brown, acknowledges the difficulty by listing the number of tries needed to get the desired result. One large, floral-like abstraction was preceded by 37 attempts.

Mitchell isn't the first to sketch with soot. In 2016, Hemphill Fine Arts showed smoke drawings the late Rockne Krebs made with a candle. But Mitchell's method yields stronger gestures, blacker blacks and subtle gradations of brownish grays.

The artist has said he enjoys the element of chance in his fiery process. Yet the finished works, based on preparatory drawings, appear anything but accidental. Their crispness recalls Man Ray's photographic abstractions, while the spare but meticulous designs suggest traditional Chinese ink paintings. With a torch as his brush, Mitchell sears forms to their essence.

Sharing the walls with Mitchell's work is a selection of stylish advertising posters made in Shanghai between 1914 and 1935. The posters, which the gallery has exhibited before, intriguingly juxtapose the exotic and the mercantile.

Dennis Lee Mitchell: Smoke Drawings Chinese Art Deco Posters: 1914-1935 Through July 27 at Gallery Neptune & Brown, 1530 14th St. NW.

Sarah Hood Salomon

Most of the photographs in Sarah Hood Salomon's "The Spirit of the Woodlands" depict water, but that's not the only fluid element in the Maryland artist's pictures. There's a sense of gentle motion in the sylvan landscapes now at Multiple Exposures Gallery, as if they've been shot through rain or are partly cloaked by swaying vines. Combined with the silvery black-and-white tones, the effect makes the pictures appear otherworldly.

The mild eeriness is not a natural phenomenon, Salomon's statement reveals. The photographer moves the camera while the shutter is open, so the picture includes shadow-like traces of a slightly different perspective on the same scene. While not so jarring as a full double exposure of separate images, the overlap blurs an instant into "the juncture of several slivers of time in a single image," in Salomon's words.

This would be less effective if the photographer hadn't found evocative locations. Such lonely places as "Two Tree Island," a tiny riverine outcropping, are well suited to Salomon's style. The spirit she seeks is a ghostly one.

Sarah Hood Salomon: The Spirit of the Woodlands Through July 28 at Multiple Exposures Gallery, Torpedo Factory, 105 N. Union St., Alexandria.