

## IN THE GALLERIES

## 'Fables of Decapitation' showcases the heady works of Timothy Johnson

BY MARK JENKINS

Dead is dead, but there's a special finality to separating head from body. That form of demise also offers dramatic pictorial possibilities, as local painter Timothy Johnson reveals in his Touchstone Gallery show, "Fables of Decapitation."

Johnson deftly renders the contours and textures of human flesh, painted in a classical style. His technique is apt for depicting events from the Bible, Greek mythology and historical eras known for beheadings. But the artist doesn't tell these stories straight: Medusa loses her head to a baseball player's swing; Marie Antoinette is surrounded by a cake-eating mob; and Henry VIII plays a deadly game of Blindman's Bluff.

In addition to such frisky anachronisms, Johnson winks at the viewer by featuring the visages of local artists, notably himself. His balding, gray-bearded head plays the part of Holofernes's severed one in a tableau based on the biblical tale of Judith — the only one of these mostly unbloodied scenes with a gory body.

Johnson wears a red clown nose in a painted selfie, part of a series of pictures of heads on stakes, each mounted atop an actual wooden post. This rogue's gallery suggests that a lineup of heads impaled on poles looks a lot like a string of likenesses hung in a portrait museum.

Also at Touchstone, Claudia Samper precisely places birds in 3-D space. "Urban Nest" consists of realistic drawings of feathered creatures, some in black-and-white and others painted colorfully, layered amid both naturalistic and geometric settings. The Argentina-born Virginian uses sheets of clear Mylar to position the various elements on different levels. Trained as an architect, Samper constructs miniature environments for animals — human as well as avian — to navigate.

**Timothy Johnson: Fables of Decapitation: I Knew I Would Die**



CAROLEE JAKES

"Dragon's Cleft: The Shrine of Agios Riginos, Skopelos, Greece (1 of 6)" is part of Carolee Jakes's "Invoking Melpomene" exhibition at Studio Gallery.

**Long Ago and Claudia Samper: Urban Nest** Through Oct. 27 at Touchstone Gallery, 901 New York Ave. NW.

**Robin Bell**

D.C. video and projection artist Robin Bell is known for hauling his equipment outside to paint fleeting graffiti on local edifices. With "Refractions," he invites viewers inside. The show at Lost Origins Gallery is a partial replica of his studio, which is a short walk away.

The artist has filled the space with video monitors, mostly turned vertical, as well as obsolete mini-TVs and relief sculptures of old TV sets. The active screens present a variety of visual information, including documentation of the political slogans Bell has projected on the Trump hotel, the Supreme Court building and other imposing D.C. structures. (One segment shows the confiscation of Bell's equipment by the U.S. Capitol Police in March.) Other images are projected onto the walls and

atop the video screens, while an interactive setup incorporates live feed of gallerygoers into the jittery montage. "The idea is that people are inside the piece," Bell said recently.

An assemblage that Bell brought from his studio, inspired by Dante's "Inferno" and Rome's mythic history, combines plastic skulls, a wolf's head and video of Bell's bygone dog. It shows that the artist can construct historical narratives as well as deliver topical communications.

The most striking attraction is

secluded in an alcove. Using a process he declines to reveal, the artist has managed to project ephemeral images in front of a whirling fan so that they appear to dance in midair. Bell has many things to say. But visitors to "Refractions" could spend all their time marveling at how he says them.

**Refractions: Prints and Projections by Robin Bell** Through Oct. 27 at Lost Origins Gallery, 3110 Mount Pleasant St. NW.

**Spurlock, Tarrat and Jakes**

In 2005, artist Langley Spurlock and poet John Martin Tarrat began to illustrate every known chemical element. "Secrets of the Elements 5" finishes the task — although the subtitle of their Studio Gallery show, "At Infinity's Edge," acknowledges the possibility of more discoveries beyond Oganesson, which now tops the periodic table at atomic number 118.

Usually, Spurlock provides a computer-generated illustration that's paired with a few lines by Tarrat. But the duo like variety, so Titanium is represented by a rolling, tattooed suitcase. (The element is used in tattoo inks.) Curium, employed in Mars rovers, yields a tinkertoy explorer. Nihonium gets a manga-style treatment, and Krypton's name is written by a lighted tube. (Inside is argon, much cheaper than Krypton.)

Some of the histories invoked by the pictures and text are complex, but others are easily read: Tennessee is hailed in the form of a whiskey bottle, and Sodium, the most basic substance celebrated here, inspires 11 poems. That's one for each of its atoms.

Downstairs at Studio, Carolee Jakes's "Invoking Melpomene" is a show of subtle, shimmering woodcuts. Melpomene is the muse of theater, but the most significant inspiration for these prints appears to be the ocean. The nine-part "Water" is a fugue

of white lines that eddy through various shades of blue. Like the sea itself, the suite is simultaneously dynamic and calming.

**Langley Spurlock & John Martin Tarrat: Secrets of the Elements 5: At Infinity's Edge and Carolee Jakes: Invoking Melpomene** Through Oct. 26 at Studio Gallery, 2108 R St. NW.

**Lee and Dunklin**

Some artists make work that quietly encourages contemplation. Korean-born Virginia glass artist Jubee Lee is more demanding. A single cushion faces "After the Big Wind Stops, I See Gentle Waves," her installation in a lowlight gallery at IA&A at Hilyer. "Sit," the mat seems to command.

Assuming a meditative position, the viewer gazes at 136 translucent panels, engraved with black-and-white horizontal gestures and assembled to resemble a partitioned Asian screen painted with a landscape. Gently illuminated from behind, the stylized vista suggests dark sea and light sky at daybreak. Adding significantly to the ambience is a small pool of rippling water at the piece's center. In such a setting, gazing at the sea is easy to imagine. Gazing into one's self may be harder.

In an adjacent room, also darkened, multiple cushions await below a screen on which Oregon artist Clay Dunklin is bathed in yellow light as he sneers his face with goo. "Song of the Wind" is a video self-portrait that distorts his face with kaleidoscopic effects. Both the actual moaning and the virtual fragmenting of his face represent the fluidity of existence. The boundary between body and world is firm and yet slippery.

**Jubee Lee: After the Big Wind Stops, I See Gentle Waves and Clay Dunklin: Song of the Wind** Through Oct. 27 at IA&A at Hilyer, 9 Hilyer Ct. NW.

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