

In the galleries: Cultures, collisions, climate change and French connections

By **Mark Jenkins**

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The sky is falling and the ocean is rising at IA&A at Hillyer, where art by Neil Forrest and Noel Kassewitz ponders the state of the union, with a few nods to French history. Forrest makes ceramic planetoids that he literally crashes into terra cotta platforms, in the process invoking Napoleon and the District's only Mies van der Rohe building. Kassewitz revisits rococo, an 18th-century French style, with one eye on the waters lapping at Miami, her hometown.

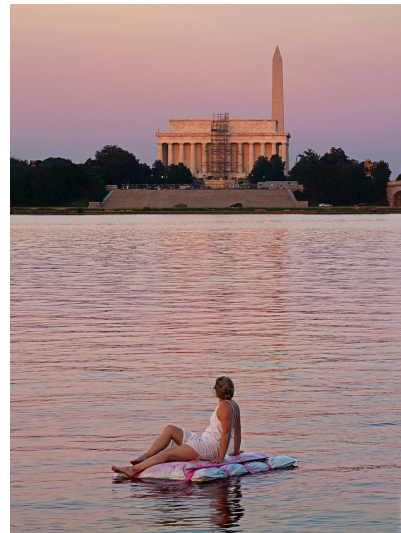
The title of Forrest's whimsical "The Washingtonian Service" refers to "the Egyptian services," sets of porcelain cups and dishes made for Napoleon and decorated with pseudo-Egyptian motifs in honor of the emperor's campaign on the far side of the Mediterranean. (Although a military failure, the expedition inspired an enduring European vogue for ancient Egyptian culture, both real and imagined.)

The Nova Scotia-based Forrest works in porcelain and stoneware but doesn't make vessels for aristocrats' tables. His spherical creations, roughly the size of bowling balls and pockmarked with craters, appear to have dropped from space. And they really do drop, as the artist attests to with a video of his process. Its soundtrack punctuates the show with regular thumps.

Adding two more historical periods to his vision, Forrest made a scale replica of a local building he dubs Washington's equivalent of Rome's millennia-old Colosseum: Mies's Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, an austere International Style structure that's undergoing a contemporary-baroque remake. The artist erects only the outer walls of the building, which he makes white rather than black — thus removing one common gripe about the library, which Forrest's statement dryly calls "perhaps unloved by many." Inside the model building's shell is the chasm left by one of those thumping orbs: Form falls to destruction.



"The Washingtonian Service" (2019) by Neil Forrest. Porcelain, terra cotta, stoneware, glazes metal, wood, video. (Courtesy of Hillyer)



"Sunset on the Empire floating in Washington, DC" (2018) by Noel Kassewitz. Archival print. (Courtesy of the artist)

If the menace posed by Forrest's spheres is more playful than actual, Kassewitz's "Rococo Remastered" addresses a genuine threat. Yet the Florida-bred D.C. artist takes a jauntily mixed-media approach, combining rococo-style paintings of aquatic scenes with found objects such as winged pool floats. The wings might belong to cherubs, common in rococo scenes. So is pink, a color that links rococo to Miami Beach art-deco buildings and what the gallery's note calls "pool-party culture."

Rose-colored flippers lean against the wall, near a set of "designer sandbags (Miami edition)." Inflatable creatures, including a dolphin and two pink sex dolls, burst from canvases as if breaking a watery surface. Several books of rococo paintings are opened to pages with scenes that echo the ones Kassewitz painted.

Both Miami and the 18th century are a long way from today's District, which could make "Rococo Remastered" feel remote from the issue it raises. But there's also a photo of a woman afloat near the Lincoln Monument, which effectively paddles the show's theme home.

Neil Forrest: The Washingtonian Service and Noel Kassewitz: Rococo Remastered Through Feb. 2 at IA&A at Hillyer, 9 Hillyer Ct. NW.