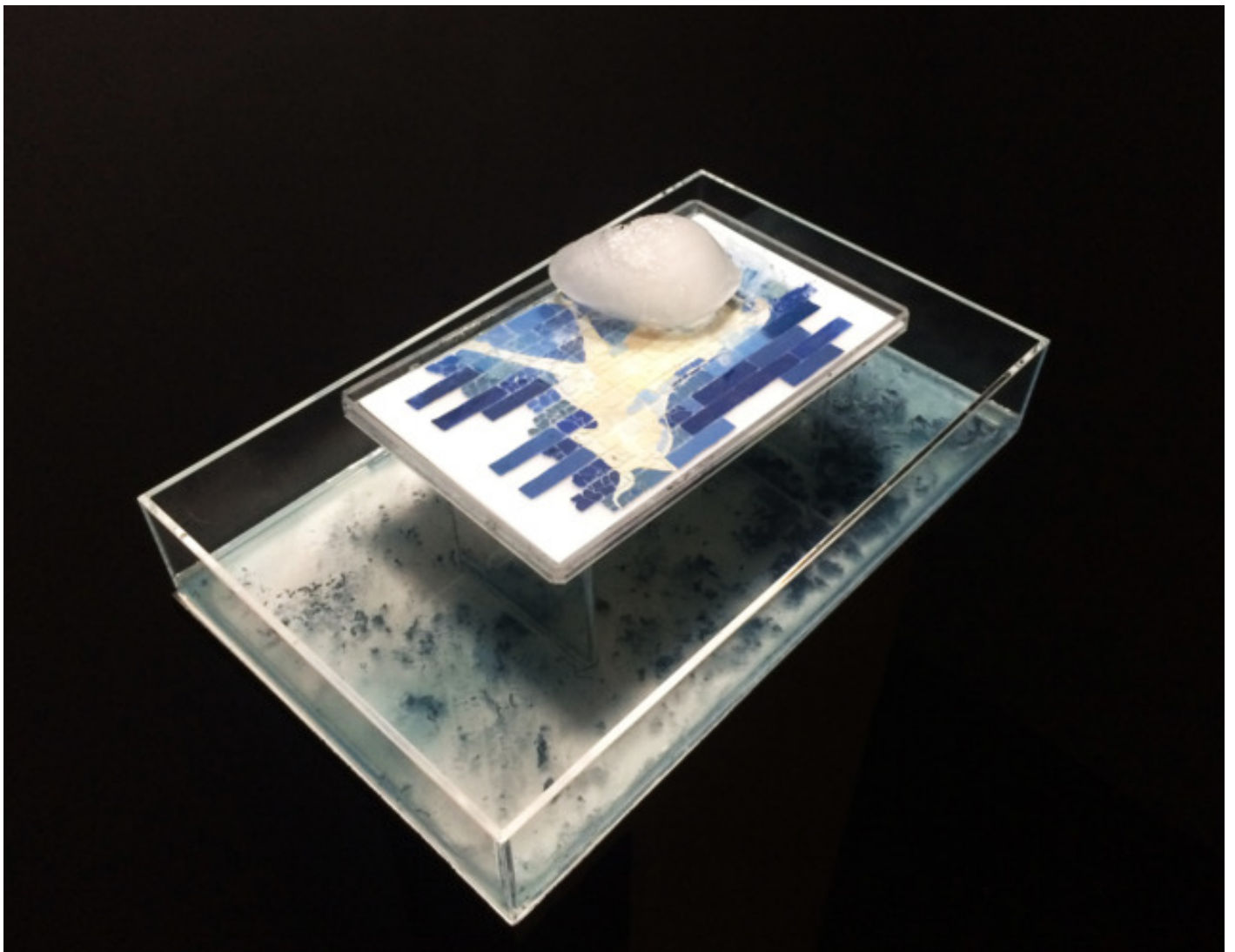


At the IA&A at Hillyer, Three Regional Artists Tackle Themes of Nostalgia, Recollection, and Deterioration

While the Smithsonian's art galleries remain closed to the public, there's plenty of terrific galleries art lovers can visit around the city. This Dupont Circle gallery is one of them.

BY JOHN ANDERSON — JAN 16, 2019 2 PM



“Object Impermanence (Ishtar Gate, Berlin)” by Samantha Sethi (2018)

Art-seekers in the D.C. area might find themselves at a bit of an impasse, with the region's biggest art museums—namely those under the Smithsonian's umbrella—closed thanks to the government shutdown. But all is not lost: The region's rich gallery scene has plenty to offer. To wit: A trio of exhibitions await visitors to the IA&A at Hillyer this month. All are tied together by discrete approaches to themes of playfulness, recollection, and process.

In *Play Date*, the most outright striking of the three exhibitions, Baltimore-based artist **Danni O'Brien** overwhelms the senses with organic and colorful work. Using a process of latch hook rug-making—essentially, threading and knotting short fibers through a stiff matrix—her playful compositions seem sculptural and painterly. The composition is bold: They appear like enlarged doodles. Meanwhile, O'Brien's high-key color palette, crossed with the physical texture of her materials—mostly wool and dollar store plastic rope—makes the works feel like **Méret Oppenheim** tripping on acid.

The individual works of *Play Date* support the exhibition's overall titular theme, with titles like "Swing," "Bare Foot," and "Slumber Party." Those titles aren't terribly literal. Presumably, most come from Rorschach-like free-association. For instance, "Bare Foot" which is a fuzzy peach blob framing numerous dark star-like shapes, leans against a wall, on a peach-colored form that looks like a misshapen radiator. "Swing" gets closer to the literal: The cloud-like blob of pink and peach, bisected by a jagged line of gray, seems unlike the seat of a swing, but it does appear to be suspended on the wall by dangling yellow ropes. It's like a swing in free-fall after its rider has jumped off. O'Brien's most visibly illustrative work has perhaps the most abstract of titles; "a Bloop and a Blast" displays two ceramic hands connected by a single fuzzy arm on a green shelf, like a field. A latch hook cloud swirls above the disembodied hands, illustrating baseball gloves and bats, dancing in a field on a bright blue day.

The themes of O'Brien's works hint at her personal adolescent girlhood memories and motifs, but they're nonetheless universal themes: Who among us has not had some joy on a swing, or in a sport, at some point in our lives? However, there are too many colorful objects in the gallery to give the viewer space to really enjoy any one of them for very long: It's sensory overload. Like a kid on a playdate, you can't play with all your friend's toys at once.

By contrast **Salvatore Pirrone**'s work in *You and Me* is comparatively sparse: a big concrete cone, a wall of plastic sheeting, piles of blue sawdust, and a heap of tool-shaped candy. Like O'Brien, the D.C. artist is tinkering with childhood memories—a love of jolly ranchers, snow cones, the color blue, and a very specific memory of disfiguring the exterior of his grandmother's home when he was little. He then combines these specific childhood memories with certain adult pastimes; his tools and building things as an architect and furniture maker, primarily. The sawdust is simply a byproduct of one of those activities.

The work lends itself toward obsession. He collects the sawdust from various woodworking projects; what is on display is only a fraction of what's left behind in the studio. The same is true for the pile of candy cast from molds of his tools. Even the wall of plastic sheeting, which is elegantly shaped and formed of wooden frames and plastic, contains more than one million marks, obsessively scratched into its surface, one hour at a time.

You and Me is interesting for its obsession and form—and the craft of each individual piece is fanciful and transformative. But the work also feels useless, which is an interesting choice for a former architect. The cone, positioned upside down, holds nothing, and if right side up, it would topple over. The candy tools, of course, won't work, and positioned as a pile on the floor they aren't exactly appetizing. The wall, transparent in nature, doesn't conceal anything; it's made of thin wood and plastic, and it's not the sturdiest of barriers, either. The sawdust is literally just detritus from an activity.

As an object, the sawdust is likely the most symbolic for the nostalgia at play in Pirrone's work: It's a record of an activity, reshaped into something more orderly, and colored, much like our memories are colored (or faded) by time. But that fondness comes across like hearing someone else's high school memories over a beer. It might sound familiar, but it's hard to connect with many of the characters in the story; a "You had to be there" moment in real time. The resulting feeling is that there's a lot more "Me" than there is "You" in *You and Me*.

Finally, **Samantha Sethi's** work in *Permanence* is possibly the most direct of Hillyer's three exhibitions. It's also the most fraught with cold practicality. Quite literally: Ice is a primary medium in her two distinct bodies of work on display.

One series displays the wonders of the world—an Egyptian pyramid, a Mayan pyramid, the Colosseum, the Parthenon, the Taj Mahal. Each wonder is displayed on a pedestal, and presented in three media: ice, sand, and concrete, each one molded from a child's sand toy.

Entropy is at work, as the ice form melts daily into a fern beneath it, only to be replaced the following day. Water evaporates from the sand form over time; eventually it too will begin to crumble. The concrete form is the more stable of the three, especially in the controlled environment of the gallery. But were it to be outside—exposed to the elements of rain, wind, sun, and temperature fluctuation—the concrete would eventually crumble as well, just like the monuments they depict.

Even the ferns are experiencing some breakdown. Though they may be suited to absorb lots of water, and live in low light, these plants are getting overwatered and starved of light. As a result, they're starting to brown. If the conditions are right, none of these items will last forever.

Sethi's other body of work involves tiles. Along a wall of the gallery are several small paintings done in gouache, a water-based medium, on acrylic tiles. The paintings, themselves, are of tile designs derived from the floors of the San Marco Basilica in Venice, Italy, the Library of Congress, and the walls of the Ishtar Gate—formerly in Babylon, now in Berlin. Each acrylic painting—some from this exhibition, and some from previous exhibitions—has been situated horizontally beneath a block of ice left to melt over the course of the day. As the ice melts, it dampens the gouache on the surface, causing it to lift, flake, smear, or dissolve, slowly distorting the image. *Permanence* is, once again, in question.



"Pillow Pile" by Danni O'Brien (2018)

For each time-based performance of the ice destroying these paintings, visitors can see it projected onto the gallery floor. It's a visual record of an act that might also have a level of impermanence: Just because it has a closed-circuit broadcast doesn't mean it's actually preserved to a hard drive. The projection also offers a subtle critique on how we consume news: looking down. In this case, gallery-goers will have to look down to the floor, rather than a phone in their hands. But the broadcast makes the performance more accessible. Only a couple people can gather around the pedestal to watch the physical ice melt on the physical painting: More people can watch it happen in real time on the screen.

Taken as a whole, the three exhibitions work well with one another. The themes are broadly similar, but the approaches aren't repetitive. All are playful, but that play isn't always fun.

At the IA&A at Hillyer to Jan. 27. 9 Hillyer Court NW. Free. (202) 338-0325. Athillyer.org.