

## In the galleries: A pictorial stew examines the seamy side along the corridors of power

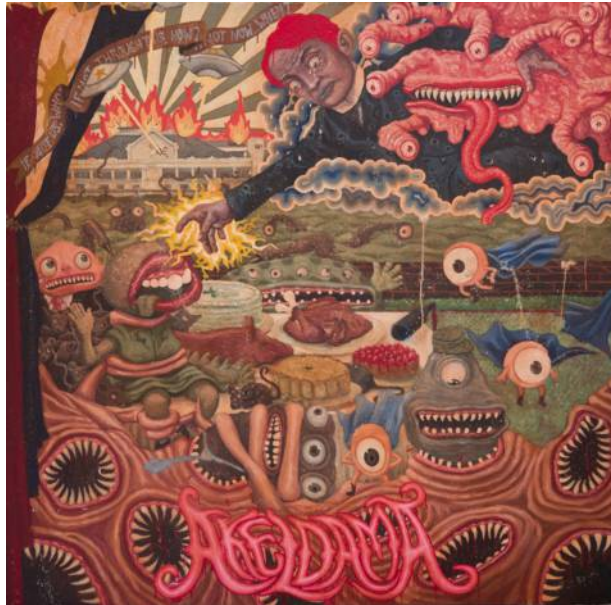
By **Mark Jenkins**

March 6, 2020 at 9:00 a.m. EST

Evil eyes, fleshy tendrils and jutting incisors abound in the pictures of Luis Lorenzana, which jumble comic-book and monster-movie imagery with the bloodiness of Catholic Counter-Reformation paintings. Yet the first section of the Filipino artist's résumé resembles those of many suit-and-tie Washingtonians. Lorenzana earned a degree in public administration in 2000 and took a job in his country's national Senate. He worked there for five years and, to judge from the work in "Heroes and Losers: The Edification of Luis Lorenzana," found it a nightmare.

The American University Museum exhibition, organized by the District's International Arts and Artists, introduces the 2005-2008 work of a self-taught artist. Lorenzana is little known in the West, yet many of his fellow travelers and apparent inspirations are American. These garish, insurgent pictures recall the skewed reflections of 20th-century U.S. pop culture drawn by underground-comics illustrators R. Crumb and Charles Burns, as well as the graffiti-rooted paintings of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Another ingredient in Lorenzana's pictorial stew is distinctively Filipino. The heroes of the show's title include four 1860s-born rebels who challenged Spanish rule — and, if they lived long enough, did the same to the new U.S. regime. One of them, author Jose Rizal, was executed by a Spanish firing squad in 1896.



“Akeldama” (2006) by Luis Lorenzana. Oil on canvas. (On loan from a Private Collection/American University Museum, Katzen Arts Center)

In addition to being the subject of a portrait, Rizal appears as a mythic figure in the sky in Lorenzana's nightmarish 2006 “Akeldama.” Rizal reaches out in the manner of God in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel tableaux, but the figure at the other end of the gesture is no Adam. He, or it, is a toothy ogre at a picnic overrun by creatures with Venus Flytrap-like maws. In the background of this controversial painting, an allegory of then-contemporary political events, the Philippines presidential palace is ablaze.

Colonial history and post-independence corruption kindled many of Lorenzana's acrylic-on-paper paintings, which include text (mostly but not always in English) and lampoon characters such as “Senator Gator.” The dyspeptic outlook also derives from a romantic split prompted by Lorenzana's defection from civil service to uncivil art. In one of several grotesque symbolic portrayals of that breakup, a grinning, sharp-toothed nude woman holds a ticker pulled bleeding from a human torso. Not only politics can break your heart.

The politics are global and ecological in “Landscape in an Eroded Field,” a show upstairs from Lorenzana’s. The contributors are Washington’s Carol Barsha, Baltimore’s Artemis Herber and Heather Theresa Clark, a former Virginian who now lives in Vermont. All have exhibited their art often in the area, so the crux of curator Laura Roulet’s concept is the juxtaposition of three very different approaches.



“Melancholia” (2019) by Artemis Herber. Acrylic and mixed media on cardboard. (Thomas Petzwinkler/American University Museum, Katzen Arts Center)

Barsha’s blithe, colorful drawing-paintings of flowers, gardens and birds are the most traditional and least disturbed by environmental threats. Herber’s myth and history-inspired sculptural paintings on battered cardboard often depict catastrophe, but stress the force of nature over that of mankind. The most conspicuously contemporary of the trio, Clark uses building materials and found objects to devise installations such as this show’s industrial-style refuge.

Erected in the middle of the gallery, Clark's piece is a lounge framed by commercial metal scaffolding. Inside are beanbag chairs, mass-manufactured ceramic fountains with running water and a lineup of record players. (The piece's sound design is by D.C.'s Alberto Gaitan.) From this man-made perch, visitors can gaze one way to Barsha's scenes, both prosaic and idyllic. In the other direction are Herber's large pieces, whose rough treatment of cardboard echoes the destructiveness of earthquakes and volcanoes. Sitting on one of the beanbags places the viewer squarely in the Anthropocene, the era when humanity put itself at the center of the universe.

***Heroes and Losers: The Edification of Luis Lorenzana and Landscape in an Eroded Field: Carol Barsha, Heather Theresa Clark, Artemis Herber***  
*Through March 15 at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center,  
4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW.*



"HeLa No. 1" (2017) by Jeffrey Kent. Acrylic on canvas, framed in oak. (National Academy of Sciences)

**Jeffrey Kent**

In search of fresh vistas, many artists have started depicting microscopic phenomena. But that's not the only reason Jeffrey Kent made the paintings now at the National Academy of Sciences. His "Surface From Under the Microscope: The Henrietta Lacks Series" was inspired by a specific iniquity.

Lacks was an African American woman who died of cervical cancer in Baltimore in 1951. Some of her cancer cells were harvested — without her knowledge or family's permission — and widely bought and sold for medical research. Kent, also a black Baltimorean, uses Lack's case to exemplify the history of medical testing involving African Americans without their consent.

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Working from the contrast-phase imagery of "HeLa" cells, Kent makes exuberant abstractions with thick, multilayered pigment. Often, he adds splatters and loose gestures atop the surface of the mostly dark pictures. Coatings of clear acrylic polymer provide gloss and a sense of depth.

Kent studied with D.C.'s Sam Gilliam, who's known for his draped paintings and who may have encouraged the younger artist to work with shaped canvases in unusual formats. These paintings were made between 2011 and 2018, and the recent ones are more formally audacious. Some are seven-sided, and one is mounted on stretchers whose jagged ends stretch past the canvas. The craggy tips seem to point toward a violent immortality.

***Jeffrey Kent: Surface From Under the Microscope: The Henrietta Lacks Series*** Through March 13 at the National Academy of Sciences, 2101 Constitution Ave. NW.



“Contemplation” by Janet Matthews. (Janet Matthews)

## Janet Matthews

The organic forms of Janet Matthews's “Tangled” are external, not internal, but the Maryland photographer sees them as revealing her inner life. The twisted trees and looping vines depicted in her show at Multiple Exposures Gallery “seemed analogous to the chaos in my head,” the artist's statement notes.

That information deepens the impact of the pictures, which are printed on Japanese kozo paper, but it's not necessary to appreciate the expert compositions. "Tangled" is divided between two series, both originally monochromatic and focused on sinuous vegetation. One consists of single shots, hand colored with muted hues. The other splices dual images so that branches and tendrils appear to continue across the whole. If these are metaphorical, they represent not chaos, but a keen eye for affinity and continuity.

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***Janet Matthews: Tangled*** Through March 9 at *Multiple Exposures Gallery, Torpedo Factory, 105 N. Union St., Alexandria.*