

Museums

In the galleries: The beauty of nature, in all its horror

By Mark Jenkins

April 30, 2016

Fire consumes, but also transmutes, and can clear territory for renewal. Allison Spence didn't torch anything for "Spread," but her Hamiltonian Gallery show was inspired by Pando, a Utah forest that benefits from periodic burns. The single-rooted Aspen-tree colony is a vast clonal organism — its name is Latin for "I spread" — thought to be at least 80,000 years old and now at risk of death.

The idea that destruction can lead to regeneration also is a motif of the Japanese horror-comic series about Tomie, a blue-haired femme fatale. She dies regularly, but is always somehow reproduced, also by a sort of cloning. If the extensive Pando is odd yet natural, Tomie is a dark fantasy of fecundity gone amok.

Spence, whose previous Hamiltonian show invoked David Cronenberg's "The Fly," muses on both the American forest and the Japanese anti-heroine in a video that melds documentary and free association. She's also displaying two leaves, apparently sacred relics of Pando, and four paintings on linen or fake fur. These have been crumpled, and fixed in their squashed state with resin, so the text and partly representational imagery are distorted.

This is not how nature is usually presented by artists or, for that matter, gardeners. Yet despite her taste for the horror genre, Spence isn't simply extolling chaos and violence. The beauty of nature, "Spread" seems to be saying, is not elegant forms or appealing colors, but unruly vitality.

Allison Spence: Spread On view through May 7 at *Hamiltonian Gallery, 1353 U St. NW, Suite 101. 202-332-1116. hamiltoniangallery.com.*

Midpoint 2016

The title of Stamp Gallery's "Midpoint 2016" refers to the status of its four participants, who are halfway through the University of Maryland's MFA program. It's not much of a stretch, however, to see the artworks themselves as midpoints. Working with paper or wood, the artists make things that seem to have frozen amid transition.

Kevin Hird is the woodsman, erecting pillars of blond lumber, punctuated with clusters of black screws. He also cuts boards into thin slices that are then fanned (and glued) into sinuous forms. They twist off the wall, halfway between the ballet and the hardware store.

Dominique Wohrer also deals in spins and twirls, but her choreography is of pulpy paper, dyed in shades of gray and black. Her creations include open-centered globes defined by webbed lines, a book-like fan of rough leaves and a long hanging piece, unfurled like a scroll or a scarf. The fluidity of Wohrer's sculpture contrasts C.W. Brooks's wall-filling minimalist piece, a grid of index cards marked with a variety of small lines. Perhaps these are the notes for a term paper on Sol LeWitt.

The show's most pointed entry is Zac Benson's "God Is Greater," which commemorates Saint Elijah's Monastery, a Christian cloister in Iraq whose ruins were demolished by the Islamic State in 2014. Benson mounted 15 identical Arabic-language Bibles on the wall, each with a slightly different image of the lost complex burned into its cover. The piece is a seared reminder of using the power of ideas to destroy as well as create.

Midpoint 2016 On view through May 21 at Stamp Gallery, Adele H. Stamp Student Union, University of Maryland, College Park, Md. 301-314-8492. thestamp.umd.edu/gallery.

Alchemical Vessels

In its three previous years, Joan Hisaoka Healing Arts Gallery's "Alchemical Vessels" asked artists to repurpose a bowl, an object whose shape and purpose evoke the ceremonial. For 2016, the gallery switched to a cigar box, a clunkier foundation. But then the goal is transformation, and most of the 123 contributors hid, disguised or significantly altered the container. A few even destroyed it. Naoko Wowsugi smashed, Nehemiah Dixon III burned and Charles Jean Pierre perforated until the ordinary carton became something fragile and even lacy.

Only two of the participants didn't employ an actual cigar box, which shows that artists, as a group, follow the rules more often than might be expected.

A box, like a bowl, can be a world in miniature. Margo Elsayd designed a reading room, complete with one of those tiny reading lights. Helen Zughaib constructed a bedroom, outfitted with dollhouse furniture. Elaine Langerman installed a nest for creatures who might actually fit inside such a box.

Many of the artists simply put their customary styles and concerns in or on a box. Patrick J Burns directly addresses the effects of smoking, arraying cigarettes that drip a tar-like substance. Ulysses Marshall ditched the box in favor of a larger, coffin-shaped form covered in graffiti and primitivist pictures. Rita Elsner also ponders death, but more gently; she made a box of and for pencils, filled with used drawing implements that belonged to the late Manon Cleary, one of D.C.'s best-loved artists.

Alchemical Vessels 2016 On view through May 6 at Joan Hisaoka Healing Arts Gallery, 1632 U St. NW. 202-483-8600. www.smithcenter.org/arts-healing/joan-hisaoka-art-gallery.html.

Michael Borek

There are 16 pictures of the president’s home in “Treachery of Images: The White House,” Michael Borek’s show at Multiple Exposures Gallery. Yet it could be said that there’s only one. Each picture of the landmark is identical; what differs is the backdrop on which it has been — what? Projected? Reflected? Superimposed?

The Czech-born Bethesda photographer would prefer that viewers solve the puzzle for themselves, although he does specify that the overlapping is not the result of computer or darkroom trickery. The White Houses seen on the sides of 16 white vehicles — buses? vans? — were all captured in a single shot. They’re distinguished only by minor industrial or environmental differences, such as drops of rain. (Amusingly, these look as though they might be the result of spray from the North Lawn fountain in the picture.)

Borek took the show’s title from a Surrealist painting by René Magritte, in which a picture of a pipe is inscribed, “This is not a pipe.” Today, the industrialized world is awash in imagery, and people are supposedly more media-savvy than they were in Magritte’s time. Yet it’s easy to confuse representation with reality. That’s why this one picture is worth 16 looks.

Michael Borek: Treachery of Images: The White House On view through May 8 at Multiple Exposures Gallery, Torpedo Factory, 105 N. Union St., Alexandria. 703-683-2205. multipleexposuresgallery.com.

 **0 Comments**



The Washington Post

Reporting the facts for over 140 years.

Try 1 month for ~~\$40~~ \$1

Already a subscriber? **Sign in**