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In the galleries: Mixing the macabre with views on mortality

Also: Artists navigate interior and exterior worlds, cabinets convey more than storage, and sculpture evoking the culture of cars and trucks



Review by Mark Jenkins

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Horror movies are a frequent inspiration for the artists who exhibit at Von Ammon Co., a gallery with a strong affinity for pop-culture grotesquerie. But Tim Brawner claims a more historical precedent for the work in his “Feels Like Heaven.” The Brooklyn artist’s recent paintings are inspired by cadaver monuments, memorial sculptures that emerged in Europe in the Late Middle Ages. The statues portrayed the departed’s forsaken bodies as rotting into skeletal remains — while their souls, presumably, achieved immortality.

Brawner also draws from edgy mid-20th-century comics, whether mainstream or underground, for his disturbing portraits. These are rendered with traditional brushstrokes mixed with airbrush technique more typical of commercial illustration, and decorated with tiny dabs of paint that suggest costume jewelry. The painter’s monstrosities glimmer with high-fashion adornments.

The subjects aren’t quite cadavers, but they sometimes bear serious wounds or feature bony details, such as the flesh-stripped hands of a pink-uniformed nurse making an apparently agonized crawl across sandy terrain. Other characters have partly transformed into snakes or are flanked by stony batwings.

Death annihilates human vanity in medieval cadaver monuments, but egotism proves more resilient in Brawner's contemporary New York. The artist jumbles terror and glamour in upscale but macabre vignettes: A woman with a rotting face contemplates a gourmet meal and a skull-headed figure hoists a drink at a fashionable bar. Eternal life no longer seems likely, so it's best to seek heaven on earth, even as your flesh putrefies and slumps from your bones.

Tim Brawner: *Feels Like Heaven* Through May 5 at Von Ammon Co., 3330 Cady's Alley NW. vonammon.co. 202-893-9797.

Personal Topographies

The pieces in “Personal Topographies,” a Betty Mae Kramer Gallery show of three local Maryland artists, both depict and define space. Mei Mei Chang’s large installation sprawls along one wall, onto the floor and across the adjacent window. Sara Parent-Ramos’ 3D mixed-media collages sometimes appear to overflow their forms, leaving pools of paint beneath them. Jessica van Brakle’s pictures are architectural pencil drawings with touches of color and framed by paintings of silhouetted black trees and leaves.

Both Chang and Parent-Ramos portray the human interior, but the former’s subject is psychological while the latter’s is physical. Chang juxtaposes cutout black strands with collages made of foam, fabric and cardboard to convey what her statement calls “topographical maps of the mind.” Parent-Ramos combines ceramics, metal, paper and unruly pigments in a manner that “investigates the microbiome,” according to her artist’s note.

Although she’s the only one of the trio whose artworks are literally flat, van Brakle is just as concerned with depth and space as the others. The central structures in her landscapes tend to be scaffolds, trellises and fences — things that enclose an area without filling it. The eye is drawn to these lattices, but also can look right through them, seeking to perceive the vast, invisible realms beyond.

***Personal Topographies* Through July 12 at Betty Mae Kramer Gallery, One Veterans Place, Silver Spring. bettymaekramergallery.com. 301-565-3805.**

Amelie Haden

The six wooden figures in “Laying Bare,” Amelie Haden’s Honfleur Gallery show, have active inner lives. But then they would, since they’re functioning cabinets as well as human torsos. Half-open doors and pulled-out drawers reveal the interior workings and carnal cravings of these creatures, whose anatomical details are explicitly correct. Within them are such symbolic found objects as semiprecious “family jewels” and a baby-doll “bun in the oven.”

Haden is a Corcoran College of Art and Design graduate who now teaches woodworking in the U.S. Virgin Islands. She clearly can produce a working piece of furniture, but these sculptures are more fanciful than practical. They were influenced by surrealist works such as Salvador Dali’s “The Anthropomorphic Cabinet,” a 1936 painting of a drawered person whose form includes limbs and a head, body parts that Haden excludes.

Dali made his human cabinet a nude woman, a common subject of male-dominated 1930s surrealism. Haden is an equal-opportunity carpenter, offering three female and three male sculptures. A roll of condoms is partly stuffed into the top drawer of one of the men, but sex is not the only urge illustrated here. The belly of a male cabinet holds a glass and a bottle of whiskey, while a female one is stuffed with plastic cupcakes, doughnuts and fruit. People may keep such appetites hidden, but Haden’s characters can be pulled open to show exactly what yearnings lurk within them.

Amelie Haden: Laying Bare Through May 3 at Honfleur Gallery, 1241 Marion Barry Ave. SE.
honfleurgallerydc.com. 202-631-6291.

Abed Elmajid Shalabi

Most of the stuff Abed Elmajid Shalabi represents in sculpture comes from the near-universal culture of cars and trucks. But the Richmond-based Palestinian Israeli artist transfigures everyday things by reducing them to fragments and rendering them in unexpected materials. The centerpiece of his Hamiltonian Artists show is a cast model of part of a truck bed made primarily of fiberglass-reinforced concrete. The form of the bed is familiar, but it’s made of a substance over which a truck might drive, thus melding a vehicle with its environment.

The title of the show, “When Tomorrow Arrives We Will Love Life,” is taken from a poem by Palestinian writer Mahmoud Darwish. Lines from Darwish’s verse may be featured in the text pieces Shalabi makes on metal highway signs coated with a reflective surface. It’s hard to tell, since the artist piles the words on top of each other so some can be read, yet the overall meaning is indecipherable.

Such ambiguity is typical of the sculptor's work, which alienates items from their ordinary uses. A gasoline-pump nozzle is simulated in glazed ceramic and affixed to a wall. Two essentially identical yellow bucket seats, which look to be plastic but are also ceramic, appear unequal because they're placed on found pedestals of different sizes. The objects Shalabi scatters around the gallery are recognizable, but they serve as signposts to an unknown journey.

Abed Elmajid Shalabi: When Tomorrow Arrives We Will Love Life Through May 4 at Hamiltonian Artists, 1353 U St. NW. [hamiltonianartists.org](https://www.hamiltonianartists.org). 202-332-1116.