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Writers, Artists Work Out Imaginative Interaction

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Written word and visual art have been inextricably linked since early Mesopotamian scribes etched pictographs on clay tablets and Egyptians decorated their temple walls with hieroglyphs. So the latest installation at the Hamiltonian Gallery (1353 U St. NW) really plays into a long-standing artistic norm. Still, “Call + Response” has an air of freshness about it.

To create the exhibition, co-curators William Bert and Kira Wisniewski asked 16 area writers to submit three unpublished literary works each — either poems or short stories. The curators then had 16 local visual artists anonymously choose one work each with the intention of creating a piece of art informed by the writing — hence the exhibit’s name. The writers sent out a call, and the artists responded.

The result is an inspired display of the artistic imagination at work. In reading the original piece of writing posted near each piece of art, one can vicariously experience the process of inspiration. To note which particular phrase or idea affected the artist is a worthwhile dissection of each individual’s psyche.

“I don’t think I’ve ever read a story where I haven’t pictured what the protagonist looks like,” said Jacqueline Ionita, the Hamiltonian’s director. “The artists were sort of thinking of what the writers brought up in their imagination.”

Forms range from painting and sculpture to video projection and fashion.

A light story called “Kiss Class,” penned by Bert, tells of a smooching instructor whose heart has been dulled by his profession. It spurred an irreverent piece by art collective Ben Savage Garden called “The Spirit of the Kiss” — what looks like a portable DVD player displays famous movie kisses with a cartoonish nose and mouth sculpted over the player’s bottom half; nearby sits a bowl of antiseptic wipes.

“Smelling Mister Rogers,” a story by Mike Scalise, inspired Bryan Rojsuontikul to create “Mister Rogers Epitaph,” a tombstone that playfully borrows from the story: “Well, there’s not much we can do about that.”

The story “Ashley,” by Calvin Godfrey, follows the eponymous protagonist, a redneck in Eden, Ga., who does little else but shoot deer and drink beer. Fashion designer Amanda Shepherd fashioned a sport coat with deerskin trim that she thought would suit Ashley quite well.

But some of the pairings are far more obtuse. Christian Howard’s “Spaghetti Western,” in which a narrator reminisces about watching movies with a friend who recently attempted suicide, seems to share little else than the title with Ian MacLean Davis’ corresponding artwork. But Ionita explained that Davis’ style is vectorized album artwork from famous records, traced in acrylic ink and mounted on reactive metalized paper. The records hark back to the artist’s childhood, and so the act of reminiscing, rather than any concrete plot line, seems to be the connection.

Without this context, some of the pieces don’t make much sense. But that, Ionita said, is what she is there for.

“It’s always better to have a conversation about it,” Ionita said. “That’s what having a gallery is all about: to bring people in and start a dialogue about the work.”

That said, some of the pieces simply miss the mark. In a few, one word or phrase triggers a tangential artistic exploit. As a result, they don’t fully capture the depth that the written works convey.

The exhibit runs through Feb. 13. On Feb. 10 at 7:30 p.m., the gallery will host a panel discussion with three artist-writer pairs: Howard and Davis; Matt Klam and Anthony Dihle; and Wade Fletcher and Magnolia Laurie.

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