

In the galleries: Exhibits stress our duty to care for the natural world

Also: 14 Bahraini artists explore their kingdom's connections to the symbolism of water, and an artist expands his personal experiences into larger social issues



Review by Mark Jenkins

January 26, 2024 at 6:00 a.m. EST

For more than a dozen local artists involved in two group shows, restoring the natural world is more than an artistic exercise. It's a moral imperative that leads some beyond depiction to action.

Representations of nature dominate “Moving Beyond Beauty: Reverence and Reclamation,” at the McLean Project for the Arts, but often the materials are as important as the imagery. Jacqui Crocetta’s collage-paintings, which suggest close-up views of woods and fields, are made from dots of paint and remnants of single-use plastic washed up on beaches. Maggie Gourlay, whose subjects include invasive plants, uses recycled screen prints to construct 3D simulated tree growth rings.

Subject and surface nearly fuse in the elemental quartet of foreboding landscapes June Linowitz painted on fabric. Her “Planet in Peril Water” portrays a flood that inundates houses and seems to drip beyond the frame via blue and green ribbons that dangle below the picture. A similar unity of image and material characterizes Elzbieta Sikorska’s semiabstract renderings of trees and rocks on artist-made paper and Adjoa Jackson Burrowes’s foliage-patterned pictures, one of which is rolled into a cone-shaped sculpture.

The piece that most closely links “Moving Beyond Beauty” to the Athenaeum’s sculpture show “A Delicate Balance” is Crocetta’s “Deluge,” which also recycles single-use plastic. Hanging sheets and pods of blue-painted film appear to threaten a boat-shaped form suspended in their midst. The large installation is related in both thematic and literal substance to Lisa Rosenstein’s Athenaeum piece “Flow,” a waterfall of shredded clear plastic.

The Athenaeum exhibition “explores the idea of achieving equilibrium,” according to the gallery’s statement. Curator Jackie Hoysted’s picks include several that are playful: David Mordini’s feathered creature with 3D-printed chicken feet and a translucent cartoon-baby head; Akemi Maegawa’s colorful miniatures, made largely of stoneware, paper and fabric and arrayed like tiny pastries; and Steve Wanna’s interactive contraption, which employs ambient sound to jiggle the water in clear acrylic pans.

Rosenstein’s sculpture is just one of four that express equilibrium by suspending objects in midair. Sookkyung Park dangles a cloud of stitched-together paper rounds, and Shanthi Chandrasekar hangs strings of metal-mesh disks whose sizes diminish as if to visualize attenuating sounds. Ceci Cole McInturff uses organic matter, which her statement says “can be interpreted as hopeful,” in her assemblage, but with a twist. The strands she hangs like vines from a curved branch are actually horsehair.

Mounted high on the wall are the show’s most functional objects, a trio of bat houses made by Evie Altman with the design assistance of Marxe Orbach. Built of repurposed wood and painted with illustrations of three different species of bat, these potential shelters for threatened animals exemplify hope for environmental renewal.

Moving Beyond Beauty: Reverence and Reclamation Through Feb. 17 at McLean Project for the Arts, 1234 Ingleside Ave., McLean. mpaart.org. 703-790-1953.

A Delicate Balance Through Feb. 18 at the Athenaeum, 201 Prince St., Alexandria. nvfaa.org. 703-548-0035.