Artists are a natural fit for exhibits at Hillyer

BY MARK JENKINS

The three shows now at Hillyer Art Space are separate, yet they grew from the same seed. All of the artists celebrate nature for its forms, its fluidity and its enchantment.

In "Branching Out," Marc Robarge and Alex L. Porter depict botanical tendrils, sometimes in contrast to manmade objects. Porter’s large, detailed drawings foreground silhouetted trees, often with buildings behind them. The structures are simply gray masses, cleanly outlined but featureless. The trees also lack color and textures, but their intricate arrays of branches make them as imposing as any cathedral.

Robarge builds oversized branches of wood, plaster and wire, painted realistically. Most are wall-mounted; one hangs in the middle of the gallery, as unavoidable as a downsized tree across a road. All of the pieces are naturalistic, but some add an incongruous element with a vine-like aspect: a pair of headphones on a cord, a livid shower head on a flexible metallic hose. Clever devices, but they can’t upstage a twist of imitation vegetation.

Nicole Fall also constructs plantlike sculptures, seemingly plant petals and fronds, from hard substrates. The wall pieces in "The Essential Visible" are bronze or ceramic, but two large floor assemblages employ fabric, mostly in unnatural hues. Fall’s concerns include humanity’s vengefulness, both against nature and its own kind, yet for all its stylistic flourish, the show has a gentle disposition. It’s less rebarbative.

Helen Frederick’s installation, "Unearthing: Images of Silence," simulates the experience of being within nature. Three stumplike sculptures contain video monitors that show impressionistic images of water, earth and trees; these are accompanied by a whispery soundtrack that involves the experience of walking through a shadowy forest. The screens also provide much of the light in the small room, which is darkened to suggest being under a thick canopy of leaves. There are also three paintings, made on matted handmade paper so that image and texture mingle. The pictures, if they could be said, become part of the landscape — just as viewers do when they enter the gallery.

Marc Robarge, Alex L. Porter, Branching Out; Nicole Fall, The Essential Visible; Helen Frederick, Unearthing: Images of Silence; On view through Feb. 27 at Hillyer Art Space, 1401 H St. NW, Wil.; 202-388-0960, hillyerartspace.org.

J.T. Kirkland and Brian Williams. Surface intriguingly complements depth in the paintings of J.T. Kirkland and Brian Williams, whose styles are compatible yet disparate in both technique and materials. Adolf Rose Gallery is showing the local artists at two locations — its home in Kensington and Studio 1649 in Columbia Heights. The latter space, which is larger, holds the bigger and generally newer work.

Neither artist’s pieces can be called "canvases." Williams paints with oils on aluminum panels, layering the pigment to luminous effect. Kirkland employs acrylic on wood, which he repeatedly sands to reveal the grain and blur the distinction between

Mark Glaimo; The Secret Life of Toys; On view through Feb. 28 at Susan Cahnway Fine Arts, 1643 Wisconsin Ave., NW; 202-995-4605, callowayart.com.

Designing America

Of the 10 biggest U.S. cities four have Spanish names and seven are in territory once controlled by Spain. "Designing America: Spain’s Imprint in the U.S.," at the former residence of the ambassadors of Spain, literally charts that heritage. The bulk of the material dates from the Age of Exploration and includes maps made when Europeans first thought California was an island (Such misconceptions weren’t corrected before previous renderings of the "new world" were classified state secrets.)

Some displays, notably on a Spanish construction firm now working on New York’s subways are more appropriate to a trade show than a general exhibition. But there’s much of interest in this wordy, somewhat haphazard selection, especially to those with an interest in maps, architecture and urban planning. The Spanish were designing grid cities of the wilderness long before Pierre L’Enfant ever saw the Potomac and helped make metropolis that were never part of their empire. One 20th-century man, for example, identifies some 2,900 Manuel Nava buildings evoked by Barcelona-based Gaudí—no Fireproof Construction. Long after Spanish explorers stopped seeking cities of gold, their successors founded other riches here.

Designing America, Spain’s Imprint in the U.S.; On view through Feb. 28 at the former residence of the ambassadors of Spain, 2016 16th St. NW, Wil.; 202-388-0680, spaininwsc.com.

http://thewashingtonpost.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx?key=p%2F9dxkIA95VglbPNKoErNiaNzMD%2FZk8yV90QY%2BEMM8pOR%2FzHSIs...
what is made and what is found. Rarely strictly rectangular, Kirkland’s pieces feature cut-off corners and are framed with either painted stripes or wooden strips. Although still partially sculptural, the more recent works are less geometric and more concerned with melding wood and paint. If Kirkland can’t make the pigment seep into the material, as color-field innovators once did with canvas, he has devised a technique in which form and content are very nearly unified.

Some of Williams’s abstractions are very nearly landscapes, or at least include such hallmarks of the genre as horizon lines and sky-blue backdrops. The painter uses shadows and modeling to suggest a third dimension, and his compositions often include portal-like shapes. Like more traditional painters of more conventional scenes, Williams invites viewers to imagine walking right into the picture.