Artists put the 'gold' in 'Gold Rush'

BY MARK JENKINS

In icons and other classical religious paintings, gold leaf plays a paradoxical role: a substance prized for earthly value symbolizes otherworldly holiness. These days, the shiny metal is often used in nonsecular work, including some of the paintings and mixed-media pieces in "Gold Rush," at the Mansion at Strathmore. But this show, which opens Friday, is one of the two participants, Thomas Xenakis, a traditional Christian icon among his other work.

Although born in Brooklyn and long based in D.C., Xenakis studied for two years in Greece, his ancestral homeland. Originally a medical illustrator, he mastered such venerable methods as fresco, encaustic and egg tempera, which he employs in literally iconic depictions of saints, prophets and martyrs. These small pictures balance the sacred and the sensual in a way that is unique in Greek and English text, and possess a stark beauty that should appeal to believers and skeptics alike.

Xenakis also makes mixed-media abstractions on gilded paper or panels, creating depth by punching or stamping patterns in the metal and arranging other elements on top. One piece in this enigmatic series, titled "XPF20," after the Greek word for gold, includes a rolled lamp chain; others feature gold-leafed clumps or clumps of golden wire. The artist utilizes many of the techniques he learned for icon painting, and the palette is similar. But where Xenakis's work is austere, his XPF20 visions are eccentric.

The other 'Gold Rush' work is by Finland's Marita Linial, whose many forms of expression include dance, theater, photography and painting. When researching a project about the world's major religions, she noticed that gold is revered universally.

Among Linial's contributions are a film and several photographs, which include some of dancers in metallic costumes and a variety of self-portraits. One shows the artist's hands covered in gold and red, revealing her painting technique. She swiftly paints the pigment by hand across large canvases and series as "Aurum," yielding pictures that are sweeping and spontaneous. They express moods or concepts, with an epic simplicity that suggests El Greco. Her appellation means, of course, "The Greek."


In the Galleries

Flesh & Bone

In classical modes, private parts are often covered by draped fabric. A few of the 34 regional artists selected by Judy Byrom for "Flesh & Bone: An Exhibition of Contemporary Figurative Art" have found a less elegant way to be modest. They depict people in their underwear, including one pair with a prominent Joe Bosco logo.

Product placement aside, this Hillary Art Space show is diverse. Notley is presented as art history reference or matter-of-fact occurrence, as well as symbolic or kind of sexy. The range can be seen in just the photographs: Sarah Kaufman's "Unbritted (Small Sunset)" shows a underdressed young woman by a washing machine, her clothing on a drying rack. Berns von Miewsich's "Back Toos with Haze" reveals weathered older flesh. Daniel Brookings' "Embrace Your Black Self" pairs a light-skinned man with a charcoal-grey figure, masked and ghostly. Paul Koller highlights a foot and Catherine Day a hand, while Giny Ho hides a head behind a fan — a large electric one, not the handheld variety.

The paintings include Shanye Huang's comic-book-like Asian beauty and Jenny Rappaport's split-panel portrait of a cat and a showering woman, rendered in a furtive cartoonish style. A nude woman and a tree, representing the elm and the grapevine, entwine in a characteristically lyrical Michelle Klagsbom picture, and Cindy Stockton Moore has drawn and painted a cycle of swimmers and divers directly on the wall. It's an effective way to show something that classical poses don't always convey: The human body moves.


Scott Hutchison, Andrea Cybyk, M. Jane Johnson and Mary Ellen Mogee

Motion is also the key to "In Sequence: Drawings, Paintings and Animations by Scott Hutchison," at Black Rock Center for the Arts. The Falls Church artist depicts his face and torso in photographs and video, but with close-ups of his eyes and mouth rendered in small, realistic oils. These paintings are displayed in grids, and are set in motion in such videos as "I Don't Know," which superimposes the 92 month paintings in succession over his face. It's a humorous statement of ignorance for a guy who knows a few things about painting and stop-action animation.

Also at Black Rock, three Northern Virginia abstractionists demonstrate various ways to be boldly "Color Driven." Mary Ellen Mogee's acrylics suggest batik, and include such nature motifs as butterflies and salamanders. Andrea Cybyk uses acrylic, but dilutes it to a watery consistency for spontaneous gestures, often on white backdrops. M. Jane Johnson's mixed-media collage paintings are creamier and more textural, when she employs white, it's overpainted to accent the juicy colors.

In Sequence: Drawings, Paintings and Animations by Scott Hutchison; Color Driven: Andrea Cybyk, M. Jane Johnson and Mary Ellen Mogee. On view through Aug. 3 at Black Rock Center for the Arts, 12903 Town Commons Dr., Germantown, Md., 301-228-2200; www.blackrockcenter.org/galleries.

Billy Friebele

Erecting monuments has become problematic. Anything too literal, or too heroic, risks appearing trite. So local artist Billy Friebele used not one but two distancing strategies when making "U Street Chromatic (for Duke)," his memorial to Duke Ellington — and, specifically, the centennial of Duke's "Soda Fountain Rag." First, the images are not impressionistic. Second, they were produced by a machine: a sensor-driven mechanical drummer and image-generator that translated street noise into both beats and notations.

The result is a series of Etch-A-Sketch-like patterns, printed on paper or brushed silver and set off by bright, single-color backdrops. Also included are the funky machine itself and video of it in action at such venues as the Lincoln Theater, where the D.C.-bred jazzman used to perform. The mechanical nature of the piece is apt, since "Soda Fountain Rag" was inspired by an apparatus. But Friebele's riff seems impersonal, while Ellington's — shown in a large-format video — gives that soda-machine rhythm a human swing.


Jenkins is a freelance writer.
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