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IN THE GALLERIES

BY MARK JENKINS

### Rachel Schmidt, Michele Montalbano and Hillyer Contemporaries

Although she doesn't encourage viewers to unleash their inner Godzilla, Rachel Schmidt does suggest a sort of walk-through of the large model city at the center of "Apaloptimist: A Future True Story." One wall offers bovine, avian and canine masks and this invitation: "Please participate in this future true story by wearing a mask while viewing the cityscape." To illustrate how to do this, the Hillyer Art Space show includes line drawings of masked women who tower over photocollage cityscapes, brandishing little buildings at one another. At least they don't breathe fire.

The artist defines an "apaloptimist" as "someone who knows that things will go to s#!\* but still believes it will work out for the best." Actually, things don't look all that bad in Schmidt's miniature city, where boxy model buildings abut wooden boat hulls — a motif of her earlier work — and small video projections show

men engaged in repetitive tasks. The recurring actions mirror the rigid geometries of the International Style facades of the model buildings. In Schmidt's "imaginary dystopian future," the major downside seems to be regimentation.

The title of Michele Montalbano's Hillyer show, "Babel," could refer to a city. But the artist is more interested in the linguistic aspect of the biblical tale of Babel (a.k.a. Babylon): Her collages feature abundant text, rendered in calligraphy, cuneiform, letterpress printing and illuminated manuscripts, enlisted for their beauty rather than any message. Montalbano also includes nature images and references to other forms of art and discourse. In the biggest piece — a scroll that rolls across the ceiling, down the wall and onto the floor — a bird chirps, "tweet," a rare acknowledgment of computer-age parlance. Another collage is titled "Kintsukuroi," after the traditional Japanese practice of repairing broken pottery with gold, making it more valuable in the process. That's akin to what Montalbano does when she jumbles images and words.

Some text is also used in the space's third current show, "Hillyer Contemporaries," which offers one piece each by seven members of the gallery's artist advisory committee. John

Paradiso frames tightly cropped photos of men's faces with flowers and snippets from gay pornography; tendrils seem to grow from the words at the bottom of Pat Goslee's painting, an abstraction with multiple hints of representation. Other highlights include Renee Stout's large assemblage, which combines a rattan fish trap, metal parts and other found objects into a mysterious totem; and Pattie Porter Firestone's wall sculpture of aluminum strips, which curve in approximate tandem. Like a lot of these works, it's graceful yet a bit damaged.

**Rachel Schmidt: Apaloptimist: A Future True Story; Michele Montalbano: Babel; Hillyer Contemporaries** On view through Sept. 27 at Hillyer Art Space, 9 Hillyer Ct. NW; 202-338-0680; [www.hillyerartspace.org](http://www.hillyerartspace.org).