Artworks show nature’s fury and gentleness  

BY MARK JENKINS

New Orleans artist Dan Tagoe has a distinctive vantage point on the American class divide: from waist deep in the waters of Hurricane Katrina. That flood has creeded, of course, but is still a presence in his work. “Post-Nihilist Upaka,” Tagoe’s show at Civilian Art Projects, includes “Made It Through That Water,” a tempest of symbols. It’s an expletive print on two types of wood — unfinished comb oak on top and poverty-row pine on bottom — whose lower half was soaked in the Gulf of Mexico. Nine bent, muddy nails represent friends who died in the disaster.

The piece’s motto is spelled out by Tagoe’s trademark — an elaborately folded dollar bill. This selection includes such absurd, none of them post-modernist, perhaps, as “No Future” and “Lost For Bribing Politicians.” While the money origami remains an effective gimmick, some of Tagoe’s newer wrinkles don’t add much. He surrounds one of the distains with bright stripes and partially embroiders another in pink yarn, but the central image is what registers: a registered trademark. The “Baby Burn” is stamped and “Center of the Universe” is draped by a black void.

The gorilla in the room is literally a potlith, sculpted of aluminum and fabricated in a hot-end shop. It’s painted in a peach-like shade that melds the skin tones of all 555 voting members of Congress. Perhaps Tagoe sees the ape as Capitol Hill’s equivalent of Katrina: powerful and heedless.

Dan Tagoe: Post Nihilist Utopia


Victor Ekpuk

Writing and painting emerge in the art of Victor Ekpuk, whose bold work employs symbols from Nifotu, a West African ideographic system. This is a familiar aspect of the Nigeria-born Washingtonian’s style, but in Morton Fine Art’s “Hip Sista Hip Sista: The Visual-Lingual Brand” the text represents both contemporary modes and cultural heritage. The glyphs decorate bodies as well as backgrounds, suggesting African-inspired fabrics but also jewelry and piercings, tattos and scarification.

Ekpuk often uses a dense field of black-on-white symbols to frame a person or object that’s in color. Of these archetypal portraits, however, only “Asian Ubokpa (Hip Sista)” Series no. 6 is rendered in black, and it’s garnished with red and blue dots at the corners. The other paintings are rendered in varying tones of brown, many outlining a woman’s head and torso in a lighter brown than the backdrop. Ekpuk, for example, uses thinly applied yellow atop a green and blue matrix. The vivid colors suit the symbolic image; these female exemplars are nothing if not robust.

Victor Ekpuk — Hip Sistas In Flux: The Visual-Lingual Brand


Stephanie Garmer and David Brown & Jovita Wysomirska

A little patch of wilderness in ViewArt’s Gibbs St. Gallery, Stephanie Garmer’s “Edge of the Forest” is housed in a dresser, a woodchest and even a bear. All are made of paper, albeit in different ways. The Maryland artist’s show includes combined print/drawings of plants and animals in a realistic, highly detailed style. Other pieces add a third dimension, turning the lineless into cut-paper sculptures finished with wax.

These include turtles and a heron that are part of “Wildlands,” a tableau that’s an entire little ecosystem, complete with loto leaves and a 3-D outline of a canoe. Among the other pieces: simulated terrariums lift from the inside — and small drawings affixed to slices of logs. Although Garmer’s work depicts the world more literally than a Zen garden, the motive is similar. Her interest, she writes, is the “showing of time” by contemplating nature.

Upstairs at Kaplan Gallery, two Baltimore artists are paired: “Bent” by Erin Zaitz, David Brown’s large pieces on square, dark wood panels, one set of which bends around a corner, reiterates thousands of silver oval; these hand-drawn, cell-like lozenges can ebb flow or curl even. Brown also is showing simpler but related pieces whose backgrounds are black Ufo prints.

Jovita Wysomirska draws her repeated motifs from Mylar, which she sometimes cuts to reveal drawings on the paper beneath. Her most elaborate work here is a large wall drawing, partially covered, in lacel plastic shreds that cascade into the room. In this piece, tiny variations are amplified into a chaotic screen of broken color.

Stephanie Garmer: Edge of the Forest and David Brown & Jovita Wysomirska: Realizations

On view through May 24 at Kaplan and Gibbs St. Galleries, 450 E. St., Rockville, Md. 301-315-6200.

Steven Cusmer

About six months ago, Steven Cusmer set up a temporary studio in a storefront at 17th and L streets NW, where he worked on a few paintings that were larger than his own studio could accommodate. Those canvases are also to biogin for Hemphill Fine Arts, where “Cusmer” is on display. But the show does include many pieces with similar motifs and a kindled style. Whether acrylic on canvas or watercolor on paper, the pictures abstract natural forms and contrast hard-edged forms with fluid, drippy gestures.

One of the paintings is titled “Veil,” recalling a series of that name by Morris Louis of the Washington Color School. But the painting that comes closest to Louis’s multilayered “Folds” is “Spring Flower,” whose diverse hues blend into an earthly brown. It’s the only picture from 2015, and in form echoes one of the larger works from the storefront stint. Other pieces, notably “In the Valley” and “Up and Down,” are more colorful, while “Wave” length seems to emphasize undulating ripples over its other aspects. A closer look, though, reveals that its seemingly blacktopped is actually a heavily worked dock of multiple veils.


Jaaniika Peerna: Light Matter and Pulse15


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Jenkins is a freelance writer.
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