An early spring is always welcome

by Mark Jenkins

Spring has arrived early in area galleries, which are building with floral imagery. Not all of it is soft and delicate. The majority of the works in Addison/Ripley Fine Arts’ “Blossoming” by Julie Bloom, who arranges bare twigs into lattice-like forms, are not. These are the inspirations for her charcoal drawings, some of which climb higher than the sculptures. The D.C. artist’s model in the forest, where trees divide space, diffuse light and cast shifting shadows. Yet Bloom’s wired-together constructions resemble buildings as much as baskets or bird cages, and are sometimes painted on bright, artificial colors. “Green Forest 65 Gray” is a leaning tower of sorts, and most of the sticks in the wall-mounted “Butterfly” are vivid blue.

Although Bloom’s drawings essentially depict her sculptures, they have a different feel. The hard edges are sometimes softened by smudges, dirt and grays, and the redesigns simulate the dimensions of the twig-built grids. The seven-foot-high “Dusky Pink” (2017) evokes unity depths with gray-on-gray gesture and has nearly the presence of a S.H. Hildebrandt.

“Blossoming” also features Jackie Battenfield’s paintings, in which silhouettes and twigs are embellished by leaves and flowers. Some of these paintings appear realistic. But the New York artist paints watercolor on Mylar panel, so the colors flow and pool, and yields accidental patterns when it dries. Usually executed in just two or three colors, Battenfield’s pictures are part minimalist and part abstract. Yet they convey nature’s serene aspects.


Kiki McGrath & Jean Jinho Kim

Swirls of green suggest the botanical origins of Kiki McGrath’s expressionist abstractions, but the local artist also has drawn on another source, examples of which are part of this Studio Gallery show. Alongside the paintings, “Aerial Roots” displays three sculptures inspired by kanzashi—Japanese flower arranging—and made by local devotees of the art form. These are large. They lean and are from traditional, rather than dainty flowers and flowers, the assemblages feature top-size branches and unusual-accents; one incorporates chunks of time painted branches. With them, McGrath has installed a black rubber hose, coiled and hanging in air. The shape of this gardening accessory echoes the spirals in the paintings and pays an amusing tribute to kanzashi. The found-object sculpture is not flower arranging, but it is an act of transformation, and that’s an fundamental theme of Japanese art.

Downstairs, Jean Jinho Kim has clustered everyday objects in ways that complement “Aerial Roots.” The Leesburg artist’s “No Boundaries” is more intriguing, but it does include glittering mock butterflies and—in a piece titled “Garden 160–12”—two rosy rosebuds. Kim’s assemblages include many industrial materials, there is a hint of kanzashi amid the car parts and LEDs.


These Flowers . . .

Botanical illustration is such a specific calling that the Corcoran used to award a certificate in it. The 11 artists in Adah Rose Gallery’s current show, members of the local Studio 135 cooperative, all participated in that program. The paintings and drawings in “These Flowers Are Like the Pleasures of the World,” do include a few non-vegetal subjects, ranging from small (small) to vast (the Grand Canyon). But most depict flowers, plants and vegetables with academic precision.

Indeed, among the drawings are Wendy W. Cortez’s “process” pieces, which catalogue the visual and scientific aspects of plants she’s preparing to render in watercolor. Other artists are drawn on black backdrops, giving their paintings an Old Master vibe, or with implied action; Donald Beekman’s Myer pictures fruit such as lemons and pears, tumbling like dice. Most ominous is Robert Matthews Bernatowicz’s series on toxic plants, pretty but potentially fatal. The skull and crosses painted on the side of one canvas warn that botanical art is not for the timid.

Mary D. Ott

“Metals,” the title of Mary D. Ott’s show at Touchstone Gallery, refers to her use of gold, silver and copper paint and ink. But the subject of the Silver Spring artist’s paintings and prints is not metal but grass, a longtime interest. Wavy blades are carved with embroidery yarn dipped into pigment to produce hundreds of lines, usually vertical. The resulting image could be an unknown lawn, a wild prairie or merely an exercise in color and form.

The metallic hues give the paintings an undeniable glow that suggests dusk or sunset. The prints lack that luminosity, but they’re just as compelling. Ott uses string much as she does thread in the paintings, drawing lines on a plate that’s then etched. The elegant “Wide Grass” series renders meadows in blue and silver, and “Grass Bouquet” contains lacy, detailed fronds in black with lesser stems in reddish brown. This is the meadow as a minimalist Eden, a place of narrow and infinite variety.

Touchstone Gallery

Blaise Tobia

Among some stern sets, austerity is required in public, openness in the private space reveals that different rules apply. That’s true, Blaise Tobia’s “Plain & Fancy,” demonstrates, of such seemingly utilitarian objects as the horse-drawn carriages of Pennsylvania’s Amish. Inside the stark black or gray interiors are bright colors, textured carpet and other unexpected decorative touches.

The Hillyer Art Space show consists of two dozen photos of in and out, both in close-up, Tobia’s images, but the Philadelphia artist doesn’t consider himself primarily a photographer. He’s concerned more with contrasting found forms than with documentary storytelling (although he does allow glimpses of Amish life, visible in the background or reflected in Windows). Although the backgrounds are intriguing, the diptychs would work even if their subject were unknown. The juxtaposition of asceticism and amblaysence reflects human contradictions far beyond Lancaster County.


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