‘Poor art’: Minimalist, but rich in its impact

BY MARK JENKINS

In the 1960s, while minimalism was draining the last bits of romanticism from American art, the home of the Renaissance experienced a kindred movement: “Arte Povera” (“poor art”). The three artists at Hirshhorn’s “Marco Bagnoli, Domenico Bianchi, Renzo Salvadori: From the Quincke Spami Collection” are from the generation that followed Arte Povera, according to the gallery notes. Yet pieces such as Salvadori’s “Continuo Infinito Presente” share the earlier artists’ interest in simplicity, functionality and industrial material. It’s simply a circle of heavy steel cable, suggested both a construction project and an exo, the swoop of black ink that represents enlightenment in Zen calligraphy. The other works are not quite so plain, and some even include pretty touches: There’s gold leaf in Salvadori’s marketing of what appears to be orbiting half-planets, and Bagnoli’s minimalist sculpture places a handmade, red glass form at the center of a wheel cageto auburn cobalt.

Such gestures are rare and generally discreet. There are calligraphic strokes in one of Bianchi’s pieces, but they’re inon-so-verimpressions in a wax circle atop a field of black squares. Odey arrangements of rectangles feature in several pieces, whether they’re a series of Bianchi’s abstract watercolor or Salvadori’s array of punched and bent tin squares. This work is stakly philosophical, but it keeps one foot planted in the metal foundry.


Matthew Mann

Indoor and outdoor are juxtaposed in Matthew Mann’s “Luxury Trouble” but just as important is the shifting balance between representation and abstraction. The paintings in the D.C. artist’s show at Studio 1469 depict domestic interiors with various degrees of precision. Sometimes, bits of interior design resemble 20th-century art made by any object available at an upscale furnishing shop. In other pieces, chairs, doors and a hat rack are arranged in front of cross-hatched patterns that are just color and line, without any suggestion of a real-world location.

Mann is something of a surrealist, so the clock may allude to Salvador Dalí. Other historical references are unambiguous: Several paintings reproduce posters from early 20th-century and Boston hard-core punk shows.

The artist demonstrates his skills as a realist in canvases such as “Broken Windows,” in which the view of trees outside is slightly blurred by glass but crispier where the panels are partly missing. “The Aesthetics of Escape” is nearly all realistic, and for such touches as a flower arrangement in a glass vase, Mann is an expressionist. The picture’s gun is an escape in the floor that appears to lead not to the outdoors, but to an open sky. By pitting reality against whimsy, Mann always leaves his personality.

Matthew Mann: Luxury Trouble: On view through May 28 at Studio 1459, 1459 H Street NW, near 202-592-6804, man@1459.com.

Jeanne Garant

Executed primarily in black and grey, the paintings in Jeanne Garant’s “27 Stripes” are almost austere. Yet there are glimmers of sensuousness in the Touchstone Gallery show, whether in the irrefutable bright colors — a gold bar, a red line — or the textures within the muted, monochromatic blocks. Another low-key element is the tension between plasticity and line — the two cover some of the pictures, offering both a smooth sheen and ragged drips.

Garant’s work shows the apparent influence of Barnett Newman, who called his thin vertical lines “zips” rather than stripes. Both artists take a geometric approach yet sometimes punctuate the rational forms with a freehand band of color, as in “Becto/ Verso.” The Arlington artist ventures further with “3 Bits of Curry,” a study in wavy lines whose only hard edges are the borders of the canvas. Most effective, though, are the pictures that maintain a tension between precision and intuition. Garant’s stripes can either hold a field together or slash it apart.


Gordana Gerskovic

What color photographer would want to shoot in a country where people celebrate one holiday by throwing powdered pigments at one another? There seem to be traces of that festival, Holi, in “Red, Yellow, Blue,” a triptych in “India Utopia,” Gordana Gerskovic’s Foundry Gallery show. But it’s impossible to be certain, since a local artist uses a macro lens to zoom into the details. She contemplates surfaces (intimately) even at their depths.

In previous work, Gerskovic seeks the worn and weary, rusted metal, aged stone, walls with traces of almost-lost words and embellishments. Some titles indicate the locations, such as temple of Shiva or Hanuman. Others invoke such Hindu concepts as “Pittu (Fire)— an apparently dried exterior — or “Shanti” (peace). Yet the visual results aren’t a tour of India than of the photographer’s vision. Gerskovic makes the close-up a window to the universal.


In THE GALLERIES


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Joan Belmar

Inspired by politics and cartography, Joan Belmar has often devised pieces in which images are party hidden by ribbons or rounds of Mylar. There are just a few such constructions in “Cumbalache,” the Chile-born local artist’s show at Addison/Ripley Fine Art. Most of the works are mixed-media paintings that layer circles, grids, seemingly rocky expanses and place names. The dominant tones of these moon–or planet-scarps are black and grey, sometimes set off by one brighter hue, usually red or blue. “Cumbalache” (“Quaker”) is the title of a 1990s tango composed for a film that condemned political corruption in Argentina. The political import of Belmar’s recent work is not blatant, but his clearly pondering the climate in his adopted hometown. The names that punctuate these maplike pictures are not those of distant worlds: They identify cities and towns in the region that runs from Pennsylvania to Virginia. Alfred directly to the walls, the many small globes of “Cumbalache: Twenty States” can be a larger semicircle. This is the most beautiful piece in a show notable for its subtlety. Using little color and only occasionally venturing into red, Belmar relies on a strong graphic sense to craft some of the strongest work he’s shown in Washington.


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