The art of politics has exploded in Washington

BY MARK JENKINS

Politically themed exhibitions were once rare in Washington galleries, but that seems so long ago — way back in the first half of 2016. Now they’re common, and mostly keyed to the current president. “Create/Change,” at Hillyer Art Space, is a little different. Katie Hargrove offers a text piece that spotlights words spoken by 16 players in last year’s Republican presidential-nomination sweepstakes. But most of the work is political in a broader sense of the term.

The 17-artist show was juried by Mary Early, director of Hemphill Fine Arts, and recalls that gallery’s 2013 “Artist-Citizens, Washington, D.C.” Yet half of the contributors are from outside the region, so local references are rarer. A few pieces use D.C. sites but aren’t specific to the city.

Sobia Ahmad’s black-and-white video depicts a woman praying in the Islamic manner on local sidewalks. It can be seen as a commentary on the status of Muslims in the United States, or just on the gap between secular life and spirituality of all sorts. Michal Gaevski’s “Pennsylvania Avenue” stacks photos of architectural facades on long sheets of paper, overlaid with grayly litonike-like gridlike structures on gauzy fabric. The buildings are real but the effect is to make them unfamiliar.

The most direct pieces address violence against African Americans. Kamal Al Moumam’s photo collage puts recent events inside a blue triangle that separates them — visually, but not morally — from depictions of horrors during slavery and Jim Crow era. Ann Stoddard’s video piece uses a live camera to cut the viewer’s face on screens inside six small booths. It makes every gallery visitor a potential target.

Lauryn Peterson’s found-object sculpture is made of something that’s become nearly omnipresent: plastic. The fantastically cheap, diabolically durable material is knotted into strands and piled on the floor, offhand yet ominous. Equally universal is Paul Sherry’s set of signs, all of which mark a place that’s “reserved for listening.” Just hanging out can be a political statement, as well as an artistic activity.

Create/Change On view through Aug. 27 at Hillyer Art Space, 9 Hillyer Ct, NW, 202-338-0325, hillyer.com.

From Nature

The six artists in the Korean Cultural Center’s “From Nature” are divided between two galleries and two media. One room is devoted to painting; the other selection, while more diverse in material, all involves carved wood.

The realist of the group is Yurim Seong, whose renderings of tree trunks are exceptionally detailed. These might stand alone, but the artist sometimes places them amid fields of soft, pointillist color that suggests leaves and diffused light. The vibrant black strokes in Byung Min Kim’s red, white and blue abstractions could be trees but also resemble calligraphy. The daintest paintings are by Hyunksan Yoon Lee, whose compositions include text and industrial colors. Her “Entitled 11,” one of the show’s highlights, sets electric yellow amid black and gray, so the effect is more urban than surreal.

Although Hyunsan Jeon’s works in a traditional form, her woodblock prints of flowers have a contemporary sensibility. She uses the same matrix to create a variety of results, and exhibits the cut blocks alongside the prints they made. Soo Il Cho’s relief sculptures of animals are akin to woodblocks, but his painted pieces, incised across several irregularly shaped planks, are the finished product. A former stone carver who turned to installations, Jang Woo Cho conjures an underwater experience with dozens of dangling red-and-white orbs. It could be an interstellar or subatomic scene, not for two deftly sculpted wooden fish that swim through the simulated sea.

From Nature On view through Aug. 31 at the Korean Cultural Center, 2370 Massachusetts Ave., NW, 202-939-5688, koreanartcultural.org.

Gray Lyons


Ric Garcia & Pierce Sonia

Mid-20th-century superheroes and movie stars socialize with figures from Renaissance paintings in Foundry Gallery’s “Dynamic Duo: Power and Form.” Ric Garcia’s oils and prints feature DC and Marvel Comics characters, while Pierce Sonia’s collage-paintings incorporate Marilyn Monroe and add a comic book “zing!” to Botticelli’s Venus. Both artist take a crack at Wonder Woman, although only Garcia dares portray a transgenre Thor.

Garcia approaches the bold colors and exaggerated outlines of comics from a simpler era, and even the red-october dots used in cheap four-color printing, just as Roy Lichtenstein began doing in the early 1960s. Pierce Sonia’s work is denser and more varied, but also looks back to the period when Marshall McLuhan first explained that commercial imagery was a form of mythology.

There’s an element of nostalgia to “Dynamic Duo,” and not just because its subjects include Superman and Jackie Kennedy. When Lichtenstein and Warhol made art that appeared rough and painted, they were creating the print media of their time. When Garcia and Pierce Sonia do something similar, it seems an intentional rejection of today’s crisp digital imaging. The ’30s and ’40s were more open, “Dynamic Duo” seems to say, because the pictures were less precise.