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Review A professional critic's assessment of a service, product, performance, or artistic or literary work

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Tehran
self readily

By Mark Jenkins October 5

In a show titled “Urban Mapping,” it’s inevitable that someone would invoke the French idea of the flâneur, whose avocation is simply to walk and experience the city. But the captioned Polaroids in Arash Fayezi’s “Ramblings of a Flaneur” don’t document Paris. They show Tehran, where public and private have a different significance than in the West. That’s a perplexity hardly addressed in this group show at Hillyer Art Space.

Iranian directors such as Jafar Panahi set their films in public spaces because they can’t represent women’s domestic lives honestly; censors won’t allow the depiction of women as they live at home, free of chadors and such. “Urban Mapping” was curated by an Iranian woman, photographer Gohar Dashti, yet it doesn’t mention this issue.

There are relatively few women or men in these photo and video works, which favor wide angles and empty spaces. The most populous images are archival: Rana Javadi’s street shots of anti-shah protesters in 1978-1979.

Headless bodies move in a swimming pool in Siavash Naghshbandi’s video, seen from beneath the water’s surface. People lie on pavement in Raouf Dashti’s video, in which humans are an urban “capillary system.” Another video is a self-portrait of assimilation: Fayezi trims his beard to look more American, having rambled to San Francisco.

Mehdi Vosoughnia contemplates near-empty lots and courtyards in one of Tehran’s oldest neighborhoods; Behnam Sadighi does something similar in a suburban area. Mehran Mohajer looks at the city through a pinhole camera whose long exposures obliterate human presence.

The only artist who considers the public-private divide is Saba Alizadeh, who photographs fabric printed with pictures of people and draped over furniture in front of an open window. Inside and outdoors, individual and society, the home and the world — all are tangible in these canny works. They demonstrate that conveying Iranian urbanity requires a special artfulness. You can’t get it just by walking around.

Urban Mapping: Public Space Through the Lens of Contemporary Iranian Artists On view through Oct. 29 at Hillyer Art Space, 9 Hillyer Ct. 202-338-0325. hillyerartspace.org.

‘Nevermind, Azizam’

Nowruz, the Iranian new year’s celebration, is in the spring, but one of its customs is now swimming in the window at Transformer. That goldfish, one of millions bought annually to symbolize life, is the most traditional thing about “Nevermind, Azizam,” a show by three Iranian American women.

Anahita Bradberry contributes neon sculptures. The geometric ones are abstractions; another writes “azizam” (Persian for “sweetheart”) in light blue script. Alexandra Delafkaran works in a more venerable medium — ceramics. Rather than make functional objects, though, she crafts bulbous shapes akin to root vegetables and human organs. Also included are kaleidoscopic collages by Sheida Soleimani, who fractures pictures of women in standard Iranian garb.

That these works mostly reflect the domestic realm is underlined by Delafkaran’s set of pillows, each imprinted with the shrugging word “nevermind.” The pillows represent the artists’ cross-cultural stance — one foot in a Tehran sitting room, and the other in an American art-school classroom.

***Nevermind, Azizam** On view through Oct. 14 at Transformer, 1404 P St. NW. 202-483-1102. transformerdc.org.*

Maggie Michael

Everything goes into Maggie Michael’s eclectic abstractions, including ink, clay, charcoal, collage, river water and acrylic, spray and house paint — as well as literary and art-history references. Metallic rust makes an appearance in “Cubes and Pyramids Share the Same Base,” the D.C. painter’s show at G Fine Art. But the striking thing about Michael’s most recent works, from a series dubbed “Residual,” is their spareness.

Although that’s not unprecedented, the artist is better known for bustling visual dialogues that feature playful gambits such as dried paint nailed to the canvas. This selection includes one example of that, as well as a few pictures whose gestures nearly fill the plane. Yet openness is more common, even in one vertical canvas that includes a plant form (unusual for Michael) and poured red patterns that resemble a circulatory system.

Most airy are the two “Residuals,” stained with rust and clay as well as pigment. Although the pictures are largely flat, their contours and tones invoke abstract steel and iron sculpture. Rather than mash actual pieces of metal into the mix, Michael suggests another art form altogether just with glimmers and residue.

***Maggie Michael: Cubes and Pyramids Share the Same Base** On view through Oct. 14 at G Fine Art, 4718 14th St. NW. 202-462-1601. gfineartdc.com.*

Jefferson Place Gallery and Arkin, Belmar & Early

The Jefferson Place Gallery is remembered mostly for its association with the Washington Color School. But many sorts of artists exhibited there during its 18-year run.

All of the venue's six originators were linked to American University, so that institution's museum is the logical place for "Making a Scene," a retrospective of the gallery's first six years.

The show features more than two dozen artists, 11 of them founding members of the gallery, which began as a cooperative 60 years ago.

There are soft abstractions by D.C. colorists Tom Downing and Howard Mehring, and a picture made by Gene Davis before stripes became his field.

But among the other highlights are disparate pieces such as Jack Tworkov's charcoal drawing, Fred Maroon's photos of European scenes and Claire Falkenstein's chrysalis-like form in welded copper. The array evokes the era but doesn't favor a particular mode.

(There's more information at jeffersonplacegallery.com, an in-development website devised by the show's curator, John Anderson, with Day Eight, a local arts nonprofit group.)

For an immersion in contemporary D.C. art, "Twist Layer Pour" divides the museum's second floor among three minimalist, site-specific installations.

Mary Early fills the tricky area with the curved wall with hundreds of identical segments of yellow wax, neatly arranged on the floor or tied together and suspended vertically.

At the other end are Sondra N. Arkin's black-wire sculptures, some also dangling; their white backdrops capture the complex shadows cast by the skeletal forms.

Between is Joan Belmar's exploration of circular forms, some of which wrap a rounded pillar.

The off-the-shelf ingredients include LEDs, silver mirror film and clear plastic cups, but they combine into an interplanetary environment.

Making a Scene: Jefferson Place Gallery and Twist Layer Pour: Sondra N. Arkin, Joan Belmar, Mary Early

On view through Oct. 22 at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW. 202-885-1300. american.edu/museum.

