Jana Biene’s ‘Sea of Change’ exhibition sets the voyage on a different course

By Mark Jenkins

One of the National Gallery of Art’s more cinematic holdings is Thomas Cole’s “The Voyage of Life,” a four-painting suite. The 1842 parade shows a sailor, solitary except for guardian angels, who navigates a small boat from boyhood to old age. Imagine the same allegorical journey, but featuring women, animals and such contemporary ecologies as a SpongeBob SquarePants balloon. That’s Jana Biene’s “Sea of Change,” most of which is now on display at IMA at Hillier.

Bigger and busier than Cole’s series, Biene’s eight-painting sequence is populated by renderings of 32 nearly life-size girls and women. The supremely adept Latvian artist’s pictures are six feet high and either eight or 11 feet wide. That’s too much old-school square footage for the gallery, which has space for only six of them. Reproductions of the other two can be seen in the show’s catalogue, published by International Arts & Artists, the venue’s parent organization.

Rather than sail life’s ocean, Biene’s figures walk in the surf (presumably the Baltic). They’re flocked by birds, accompanied by a white mare and carrying pink flowers, party balloons and a tiger cub. The women and girls are of various nationalities and frequently nude or partly clothed. Rather than angels, Biene presents two women with small wings drawn on their napsels. Their wings are too small. The women is feminest, but the vibe is Victorian, specifically Pre-Raphaelite. The seeming goal is to return to classical virtues and symbols, tempered by a modern woman’s sensibility.

Biene has traveled in Asia, and here includes a baby yaga, an aged Indian woman and a dress embellished with “The Great Wave,” the best-known image of the 19th-century Japanese artist Hokusai (now the subject of a Freer Gallery show). But the influence of edgy Japanese pop artists such as Yoshitomo Nara, previously hint in Biene’s style, has vacuolated.

The artist’s pictures of adolescent women, some of them apparently self-portraits, used to feature scraped flesh and distorted features and proportions. “Sea of Change” is tidier and prettier. The series alludes to conflict and death, yet its imagery is too sugared to sting. The panel that includes a skull nestles it in a basket next to a pair of white kittens.

Jana Biene: Sea of Change
Through Dec. 15 at IMA at Hillier, 9 Hillier Ct. NW.

All Together Now

There’s not a single representational artist among the six contributors to De Novo Gallery’s “All Together Now” and yet most of the works engage somehow with the visible world. The participants, all based in Washington, both draw from and defy the principles of mid-20th-century abstraction. Photographer Dean Kessmann finds color, pattern and depth along streets, grabbing vignettes that include graffiti and foliage. Rex DeLafleur uses traditional ceramic techniques to make functional vessels that further blur usual ideas of form by melding with their pine supports. Tom Bannard paints small oils that are actually more layered than their simple surfaces promise.

The closest thing to a realist in this crew, Matthew Mann paints actual things precisely but emphasizes patterns and surrealistic whites. His “Threat Level” places the shape of an oblong yellow fruit in one corner, mirrored by a barely visible blue counterpart in another. Adrienne Gailther’s hard-edge color-field takes subtle cues from the real world. Her “Cigarette Pants” places narrow white stripes on a red background, with rippling textures that quietly disrupt the flat forms.

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All Together Now
Through Dec. 14 at De Novo Gallery, 1287 Fourth St. NE (entrance on Real Place).

Russell Biles

Ceramicist Russell Biles musters battalions of small figurines, most of them caricatures of people seen recently on TV news programs. But the most compelling creations in “Subversive Nature,” Biles’s show at the District Clay Gallery, are turtles. The South Carolina artist has a special affinity for the animals, whose patterned shells resemble hard-edge yet delicate porcelain.

Biles calls himself a “son of the South,” but his politics are compatible with those of true-blue Washington. He parodies President Trump, shown hoisting a naked porn star, as well as Kim Jong Un and a devil-horned Vladimir Putin. A bust of Barack Obama features a predator drone on his forehead, a protest of the former president’s sanction of automated assassination. Hundreds of tiny figures, their heads drops of A, B, AB or O, assemble to protest the ban on gay people’s donation of blood.

Russia Biles also bears witness. A beautifully rendered pairing of blooded turtle and skull-buffed eagle is a parable of European colonization of the Americas. Biles also offers a sculpture of a little girl atop a box turtle in which the shell’s pattern has migrated to the child’s face and hands. It’s a vision of rapport with nature that’s also a celebration of human virtuosity.

Russell Biles: Subversive Nature
Through Dec. 14 at District Clay Gallery, 2414 Douglas St. NE.

Lindsay Mullen

The new impressionistic paintings in Lindsay Mullen’s “Adaptive Measures” conjure haze, earth and, above all, light. What’s less obvious is that the subtly graduated oils also represent “terror and despair,” according to the brochure for the Susan Calloway Fine Arts show.

Those feelings are psychological side effects of climate change, whose consequences the painter has observed in vulnerable locales such as Iceland. A British-born and-based painter, her other work reflects on a boundary between Washington and the Spanish island of Menorca, Mullen is as inspired by ecological concerns as by J.M.W. Turner’s abstract 19th-century land- and seascapes.

The world is not on fire in her pictures, which mostly forge bright colors and deep blacks. Nearly all are horizontal, sometimes extremely, although she does flip the prevailing format for a depiction of a waterfall whose misty cascade appears to glow. The rush of nontoxic water is ominous, but Mullen is also alert to its beauty.

Lindsey Mullen: Adaptive Measures
Through Dec. 14 at Susan Calloway Fine Arts, 1643 Wisconsin Ave. NW.

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