

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 Hargrave 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-Citizen, 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 Gavish's "Pennsylvania Avenue" stacks photos of architectural facades on long sheets of paper, overlaid with ghostly likenesses of the same structures on gauzy fabric. The buildings are recognizable, but the effect is to make them unfamiliar.

The most direct pieces address violence against African Americans. Kamal Al Mansour's photo collage puts recent events inside a blue triangle that separates them — visually, but not morally — from depictions of horrors during the slavery and Jim Crow eras. Ann Stoddard's video piece uses a live camera to put the viewer's face on screens



Paul Short, "Loiter Here" (2016), on view through Aug. 27 in "Create/Change," a politically themed exhibition at Hillyer Art Space.

inside six small hoodies. It makes every gallery visitor a potential target.

Lauren 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 Short's set of signs, all of which mark a place that's "reserved for loitering." 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. hillyerartspace.org.

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 Bukang Kim's red, white and blue abstractions could be trees but also resemble calligraphy. The densest paintings are by Hyang Yeon Lee, whose compositions include text and industrial colors. Her "Untitled 11," one of the show's highlights, sets electric yellow amid black and gray, so the effect is more urban than sylvan.

Although Hyun Jeung 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 Choi'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's turned to installations, Jung Woo Cho conjures an underwater experience with dozens of dangling red-and-white orbs. It could be an interstellar or subatomic scene, if 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. koreaculturedc.org.

Gray Lyons

She's based in Indiana, but Gray Lyons is present in "Lexicon," her show at VisArts. That's the artist's full-size body in the multi-panel photo-based pictures, often afloat horizontally as if in water. Lyons uses the cyanotype process, employed for more than a century to make architectural blueprints, so the results are ghostly white on midnight-blue backgrounds. The photosensitive paper renders the figures soft and indistinct, suggesting motion and mutability.

Lyons writes that these are "narrative-based self-portraits," and that the use of her own body allows for "a physical resolution rather than an intellectual one." Aside from the blue-white vestiges of her form, the artist includes a large installation of cutout model butterflies, pinned

to the wall in a swarm that segues into a mini-galaxy of stars. These, in turn, echo the stars in one of the four-panel pictures.

Exactly what story Lyons is telling is unclear. But the haziness of these images is part of their appeal. They appear to have aquatic depths, and whatever bobbles beneath the surface remains out of reach.

Gray Lyons: Lexicon On view through Aug. 27 at Gibbs St. Gallery, VisArts, 155 Gibbs St., Rockville. 301-315-8200. visartscenter.org.

Ric Garcia & Fierce Sonia

Mid-20th-century superheroes and movie stars socialize with figures from Renaissance paintings in Foundry Gallery's "Dynamic Duos: Power and Form." Ric Garcia's oils and prints feature DC and Marvel Comics characters, while Fierce Sonia's collage-paintings incorporate Marilyn Monroe and add a comic-book "Zing!" to Botticelli's Venus. Both artists take a crack at Wonder Woman, although only Garcia dares portray a transgender Thor.

Garcia reproduces the bold colors and elementary outlines of comics from a simpler era, and even the Ben-Day dots used in cheap four-color printing, just as Roy Lichtenstein began doing in the early 1960s. Fierce 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 Duos," and not just because its subjects include Superman and Jackie Kennedy. When Lichtenstein and Warhol made art that appeared rough and plain, they were emulating the print media of their time. When Garcia and Fierce Sonia do something similar, it seems an intentional rejection of today's crisp digital imaging. The '50s and '60s were more open, "Dynamic Duos" seems to say, because the pictures were less precise.

Dynamic Duos: Power and Form On view through Aug. 27 at Foundry Gallery, 2118 Eighth St. NW. 202-232-0203. foundrygallery.org.