

At Project 4, a delicate show of flower power

By Jessica Dawson
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Laurel Lukaszewski's latest exhibition at Project 4 looks like two shows in one. The first is a meditation on the fleeting beauty of nature. The other, an ungainly ode to pasta.

The exhibition starts off right. Walk in and you're looking at hundreds of delicate porcelain cherry blossoms installed along the wall in gentle waves. Your eyes drift upward toward the gallery's second floor loft, where the blossoms sprout along the top floor. Called "Sakura," the piece embraces the space like gorgeous 3-D wallpaper.

Spend time admiring the work's haute-couture-like intricacy: Blossoms fashioned from cream-colored porcelain are affixed, one by one, to the wall by means of delicate copper wire; the installation looks as if it took ages. Here, the orange blush of copper illuminates the channel between wall and flower, subtly warming an otherwise sepulchral palette.

Lukaszewski says that her piece consists of 3,020 blossoms -- one for each of the cherry trees that Japan gave to the United States in 1912 (following a disastrous shipment of 2,000 insect-infested trees two years earlier). With that political gesture as her inspiration, Lukaszewski creates a literal monument to diplomacy. Her porcelain blossoms have the solemnity of a grave marker, yet their attention to detail suggests a deliberation bordering on optimism.

Walk deeper into the gallery and you'll encounter a curtain made from interlocking porcelain ribbons shaped -- I hate to say it -- like flat noodles. Though the work's construction intrigues (small segments interlock and hang from one another) the work nevertheless feels like a misplaced shower curtain.

The conceit Lukaszewski establishes with "Sakura" -- art that surrounds us, rather than art parceled out as a discrete object -- is disturbed by the self-conscious objectness of that curtain. Something similar happens out back, on the gallery's rear porch, where a pile of similarly shaped porcelain gathered in a corner feels too much like outsize fettuccine awaiting sauce.

Follow the stairs to the second level and the rest of "Sakura" unfolds. Here, our eyes move up, down, around and over the balcony to take a vertiginous look down toward the gallery entrance. Lukaszewski creates a visual path that our eyes can't help but chase, on and on and on.

Upstairs in a rear gallery, a snaking pile of porcelain leaves, each delicate and crinkly and fairly begging for our touch, suggests a requiem to nature and the passage of time. Called "Ghost," the work exudes a visceral deadness in its leaves. It proves the perfect pendant for "Sakura": Both are silent and voluble at the same time.

Iacovone, Chan

Hamiltonian Gallery offers new work by two recipients of its modest fellowship program. Michael Dax Iacovone's video and photography document the action -- and lack thereof -- at Washington intersections using strategically placed mirrors to gain additional views. Some videos include the artist, some do not. One monitors the gallery and its entrance door in real time.

In the video "14th and U: Four Times Around," Iacovone does just that: He purposefully makes the rounds of the intersection, hash-marking the sidewalk each time he reaches a corner. Watching it, a briefly pleasurable sense of the uncanny -- gallery visitors probably would have passed the same intersection just minutes before -- gives way to the realization that this a blandly executed exercise in . . . I'm not sure exactly what, though the artist claims kinship to the situationists, a 1960s Marxist art collective. At its worst, "14th and U: Four Times Around" could pass for satire of the art world's embrace of the nominal.

It is Anne Chan's prints and sculptures, riffing as they do on cubicle culture, that are worth the visit here. The artist offers several groovy, glossy close-ups of staples -- yes, the ones that fill the Swingline -- blown up so large as to look architectural (one image mimics a colonnade; it takes a moment to register the outsize scale). These pictures are clever, but we've seen their likes before.

Turn your eyes instead to Chan's sculpture "Collective," which sits on the ground like a playful riff on the macho abstract expressionist block. Instead of making the work out of steel, as abstract expressionists did once upon a time, Chan made hers out of discarded business cards.

The artist acquired her less-than-heroic materials from her colleagues -- and former colleagues -- at the Baltimore architecture firm RTKL. (Chan is the photography coordinator there.) The firm recently reshuffled its offices; some staff members were laid off. Chan crafted "Collective" from this cache of redundant cards, the castoffs of a downsized economy.

All those paper cards reduce Chan's big, formal gesture into a visual play on economic constriction. Her house of cards reminds us how deeply we identify with our jobs and how fleeting those identifications can be -- especially in these times.

Chan's second sculpture -- if we can call it that -- waits behind a partition in the gallery's rear. Called "Assembly," it's a 14-foot-long, jewellike carpet of silver that sits on a small, raised platform. The piece isn't really a rug, but it looks a bit like one: Tiny clusters of staples, 12 or 14 or so each, stand every few inches in neat rows. There are tens of thousands of staples here, each clot glistening like silver buttons under the gallery lights. In many ways the opposite of "Collective," which uses the mundane to subvert heroic form, "Assembly" finds Chan turning the everyday into the sublime.

Dawson is a freelance writer.

Laurel Lukaszewski at Project 4, 1353 U St. NW, third floor, 202-232-4340, Wednesday-Saturday, noon-6 p.m., to Dec. 18. <http://www.project4gallery.com>

Michael Dax Iacovone and Anne Chan at Hamiltonian Gallery, 1353 U St. NW, 202-332-1116, Tuesday-Saturday, noon-6 p.m., through Saturday. <http://www.hamiltoniangallery.com>

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