

In the galleries: From primal and primordial to political commentary

By **Mark Jenkins**

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Technically, the ceiling-high tree that stands in Hamiltonian Gallery is not alive. But all it takes to animate Yacine Tilala Fall's evocative installation is a little water.

Made of about 150 ceramic pots hung in rough columns on natural-fabric ropes, the tree-shaped assemblage was constructed by Fall as a setting for her performances as "a bound and camouflaged subject," according to the gallery. In the absence of the artist, a Hamiltonian staffer simply pours water into the uppermost vessels. The liquid drips through the pots' perforated undersides, linking the sculpture's parts literally as well as conceptually. The trickling yields a gentle patter that conjures a rainforest soundscape, much as the intricate shadows cast by the pots and ropes simulate being enveloped by thick, sunlight-splintering vegetation.

The piece's title is in French, and translates to "The Roots of the Baobab: Inside a Family of Water." The subject and the choice of language are homages to Senegal, where the D.C. artist has encountered the species known as the "tree of life." Yet Fall's goal isn't merely to celebrate Africa's culture and landscape. Water courses through people as it does through trees, which makes her installation both primal and universal. The tree of life is a metaphor for all sorts of existence, including human. To step into the confines of Fall's baobab is also to enter, symbolically, ourselves.

The title of the other show now at Hamiltonian, "Performing Incantations," also suggests primordial forces and ceremonies. But Britt Sankofa's ritual fire burns electronically, flickering across a half-dozen video screens and an installation that features projected images of flame. The exhibition's subtitle is "Deconstructing Racialized and Gendered Media Erasure," and its goals are to analyze and resist the cultural subjugation of Black women.

Curated by Dawne Langford, the selection of Sankofa's videos includes collages of animals and people, slogans derived from politics and self-help texts, corporate logos and at least one social media CEO. That projected blaze plays across a TV, candles, liquor bottles and videotapes of such movies as "Natural Born Killers" and "Uncle Tom's Cabin." More gently, the videos show an African American teenager playing with a pair of Barbie-like dolls, one Black and one White, who wear matching outfits. These manufactured figurines can be seen just as products, or as catalysts. Like so many of the mass-market totems Sankofa incorporates, they can be transformed by an individual imagination.

Tilala Fall: Les Racines du Baobab: Dans Un Famille D'eau and Britt Sankofa: Performing Incantations: Deconstructing Racialized and Gendered Media Erasure Through Sept. 18 at Hamiltonian Gallery, 1353 U St. NW. By appointment only.

Alex Bag and Jason Yates

Videos are among the elements in Alex Bag and Jason Yates's mixed-media, mostly found-object shows at Von Ammon Co., but the warehouselike space is dominated by dolls. Outfitted by Bag, the stuffed tots hang from the ceiling with their feet just above the floor. The effect is a little eerie, since the dolls are both mobile and trapped, suspended in time as well as space. The show's title, "I'm Sorry You All Ended Up Here," could refer to the hanging creatures, or to the gallery visitors who encounter them.

The dolls carry sacks, mostly small shopping bags. The show also features several shopping carts and racks, sourced partly from dollar stores, originally used to merchandise chips and cupcakes. Suggesting a kiddie birthday party gone wrong are shiny gold balloons and a life-size figure of a scary clown, which comes to messy life in one of the videos. Childlike drawings are the work of Bag, a New York-area artist, and her 10-year-old son, August.

Since they're painted a uniform black and arrayed neatly on shelves, Jason Yates's contributions to the show appear less anarchic. But the Los Angeles-based artist, too, trains a cold eye on American consumerism. He collects mass-produced plastic figures of gnomes, cartoon characters, biblical scenes and such, which could be quite garish in color. Rendered in restrained black, however, they recede and become almost minimal — a small triumph over junk culture.

There's nothing restrained about Bag's videos, which are soundtracked by circus music and punk rock. In one, made on the premises, a clown is tormented. Another is a jagged montage, drawn from Bag's Instagram account, of commercials for grooming, therapy and other self-improvement products. Watching this cavalcade of vulgarity, a natural reaction would be to feel a little sorry.

Alex Bag and Jason Yates: I'm Sorry You All Ended Up Here Through Sept. 27 at Von Ammon Co., 3330 Cady's Alley NW.

Reclamation

Secluded in a sunken shopping plaza, the Watergate Gallery isn't even on a street. Yet the venue is hosting "Reclamation," a show that channels the energy of street protests and spray-painted tags. Two of the artists are rooted in graffiti, aesthetically if not literally; the third makes screen prints that mostly repurpose the subjects and styles of mid-20th-century comic books.

Erik White is based in Ocean City, Md., but his technique owes more to the 1980s New York that produced Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. The artist is aware of his debt to Basquiat, and successfully eludes his influence in two stylized paintings of palm trees. But his more derivative work, with its jagged shapes and dramatic black backdrops, is more powerful. Such protest-march-ready pieces as the strongly vertical "BLM Fist" are also more timely.

The other two contributors are pseudonymous D.C. residents. Absurdly Well paints with as much vigor as White, and often employs reflective road signs as his canvases, whether his subject is President Trump or a bloodily near-abstract rendering of "Hemophilia." Printmaker Divorce Culture works on a smaller scale — Instagram is his principal showcase — but with loaded imagery of sex, drugs and money, interspersed with political commentary. Although not all of this work is designed to be splashed on a wall, all of it has the urgency of wheat-pasted broadsides.

Reclamation Through Sept. 26 at Watergate Gallery, 2552 Virginia Ave. NW.
