

IN THE GALLERIES



XAVIER RANDALL/EATON HOUSE

Indigenous art informs contemporary visions

BY MARK JENKINS

The first puzzle of the Kreeger Museum's "Perplexity" is "Where is it?" Pieces by seven former Hamiltonian Artworks fellows are scattered through galleries filled primarily with items from the permanent collection — and even installed in a fireplace, which is where Amy Boone-McCreesh's "Good Luck Charms" hangs. The goal is to juxtapose the new works with the Kreeger's mostly 20th-century holdings.

Boone-McCreesh's funky collages are strung partly with found objects, and Sarah Knobel makes incongruously elegant photos of trash, such as a trio of cardboard beverage containers, tied together with blue cord and leaking pastel-colored smoke. There's also a misty quality to Joyce Yu-Jean Lee's wall sculpture, but its seemingly soft contours are cut from shiny, hard-edge metal. The climate-change-inspired piece is inset with tiny squiggle-shaped mirrors that bring the viewer's face into the mix.

The maker rather than the spectator is part of Helina Metaferia's and Michael Dax Iacovone's contributions; both include videos that reveal their creators in action. Metaferia's video shows her in performance, wearing the patchwork tapestry that hangs on an adjacent wall; the black-and-white quilt is made of fabric pieces silk-screened with photos of the civil rights movement. Iacovone sketches massive geometric figures in the soil of Utah and Nevada deserts, and documents the temporary drawings in photos and videos shot from a drone.

Dramatically stark landscapes feature as well in Jerry Truong's two monochromatic triptychs, rendered realistically with charcoal and one other ingredient: incense ash from a Vietnamese ancestral altar, thus infusing these empty vistas with personal history. Brian Michael Dunn's "Pool Side" turns on a different sort of surprise material: What appears to be a crumpled towel is actually a rectangle of creased, folded and painted steel. The perplexity here is simply, splendidly playful.

Perplexity Through Dec. 10 at the Kreeger Museum, 2401 Foxhall Rd. NW.

Transformer 20

In 2002, Transformer opened in a tiny storefront near 14th and P streets in Northwest Washington. The nonprofit gallery is still there, but is using a much larger space for its anniversary show: "Transformer 20" fills the GW Corcoran's imposing atrium with text, artifacts and works by nearly 100 artists. Most of the contributors are local, and more than a few are Corcoran alumni. But the exhibition demonstrates the gallery's reach with an antic, semi-traditional painting of a ship by Ryota Unno, one of the participants in a Transformer-sponsored 2012 survey of Japanese art inspired by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

There's relatively little abstraction in this array, and a wide variety of portraiture. Yacine Tilala Fall depicts herself in communion with the earth in a black-and-white still from a performance. In his drawing of a



CAMILLE DESANTO/TRANSFORMER

man's face, David Ibata employs pastel and Conté crayon to convey rich Black skin tones. Ryan Nelson renders upswept hair with precisely inked lines in his depiction of a woman that focuses on her bouffant. Alessandro Gianni paints crystalline shards that partly sever portrayals of heads seemingly lifted from Renaissance canvases.

More surreally, a human head is just one ingredient in Nilay Lawson's drawing of a bowl of black beans and rice that also includes a tree, car and snake. Other views of nature are diverse in concept and media: Johab Silva's flowers are animations that dance on a video screen; Chandi Kelley's black-and-white photographs distill the moon to circular glimmers; and Naoko Wowsugi's "New Moon" is an orb made of soil and seeds for wildflowers that sustain pollinators. Like so many of these artworks, Wowsugi's piece fits a large vision into a compact package.

Transformer 20 Through Dec. 10 at GW Corcoran Flagg Building, 500 17th St. NW

Méné

Although Méné is a graduate of prestigious art schools in his native Ivory Coast, his most important instructors may be prehistoric cave painters. The artist can't know what those precursors intended, of course, but he does reinterpret their style and motifs in a

contemporary mode. The pictures in "Shaping Dreams," Méné's show at African Art Beats, were painted in acrylics on canvas, yet appear folkloric and timeless.

The exhibition's title is echoed by the names of several individual pictures, which often refer to dreams or the stars. Both themes hint at Méné's intuitive approach, which involves opening himself to reverie or, perhaps, cosmic forces. The imagery is mostly abstract, but suggests animals, plants or geological forms. Densely dotted patterns, reminiscent of Australian Aboriginal art, refer to scarification, the traditional African practice of cutting permanent adornments into human skin.

The boldest colors in Méné's paintings — applied with fingers, twigs and carved pieces of wood as well as brushes — are bright and often seem unmixed. Yet the pigments are sometimes applied in layers, and contrasting hues can show through the top level. The effect evokes strata of earth and rock, but also eras in time. Somewhere under the surface, symbolically at least, is the primeval art on which Méné builds.

Méné: Shaping Dreams Shaping Dreams Through Dec. 13 at African Art Beats, 3501 Lowell St. NW. Open by appointment.

Jesse Raine Littlebird

Indigenous rock carvings are among the inspirations for Jesse

Raine Littlebird, an Albuquerque artist of Laguna and Kewa Pueblos heritage. Yet the three large paintings on display as "A Fragmented Exodus," made while Littlebird was in residence in November at Eaton House, are contemporary in appearance and references. The artist uses oil stick to outline the ground, mountains and people in his multipanel landscapes, and fills in the colors with hot-colored spray paint, demonstrating a stylistic affinity for both graphic novels and graffiti.

Two pictures were completed when this writer visited, while the third was in progress. The finished works depict rugged, high-desert vistas, but where one is largely unpopulated, the other is packed with people, many in buffalo-like masks. The horde in that painting is headed toward the near-empty expanse of the first picture, the artist said, adding that the two landscapes are in dialogue.

Another conversation the paintings illustrate is between eternal and modern. Sketched and scrawled in the open sky above the multitude are symbols, including ones derived from petroglyphs, and comments written by participants in a workshop Littlebird led. One phrase is from the artist himself: "the lithium age." The devices that promise the future are powered by elements clawed from ancient land.

Jesse Raine Littlebird: A Fragmented Exodus Through Dec. 10 at Eaton House, 1203 K St. NW.

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