

Art

A show of 51 artists shaping the D.C. cultural scene

Touchstone Gallery's "District 51 Art Show" gathers almost 100 works by visual artists illustrating city life and abstract forms.

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Review by Mark Jenkins

Longtime area residents will probably feel at home perusing "[The District 51 Art Show](#)," but newcomers and outsiders may be perplexed in (and by) places. The exhibition, which gathers nearly 100 works by 51 D.C.-connected artists, contains many images of the city yet forgoes the customary locations and vantage points.

Consider, for example, Christopher Buoscio's two epic oil paintings of Union Station. Rather than depict the structure's grand front, exemplary of neo-Grec official Washington, the artist documents the tracks behind the station and the Greyhound bus station wedged into its parking garage. Buoscio's perspective is literally that of an insider.

Among the other views of unmonumental D.C. are three loosely realistic oil paintings: Cathy Abramson's of a Metro car interior twisted partly inside out by a window reflection; Shelley Lowenstein's of a woman outside a blank K Street building whose address is a large part of the scenery; and Elaine S. Wilson's of the forlorn RFK Stadium, dwarfed by a dump truck in the foreground. Funkier and more fragmented are Yosef Abraha's collage of Gallery Place, inventively assembled from text-heavy advertising images, and Vanessa Villarreal's 3D mixed-media portrait of a dancer at Seventh and H streets NW, an intersection identified by conspicuous street signs.

"District 51" is not devoted exclusively to views of D.C. The show addresses many subjects and is particularly interested in the Black experience. The selection even includes some abstractions, although not so many as might be expected in a survey of a city that's widely known for color-field painting. And one of the seemingly nonrepresentational pictures is Rosa Ines Vera's arrangement of color blocks, mostly blue and green, whose title reveals it to be a rendering of the Anacostia River.

The artworks were chosen by Caitlin Berry, director of the Irene and Richard Frary Gallery at Johns Hopkins University's D.C. center; Nehemiah Dixon III, who focuses on community outreach at the Phillips Collection; and Anisa Olufemi, a curator at Hamiltonian Artists. The items they chose are intriguing but highly variable in quality and mostly made with traditional media. There's a single video, only a few photographs, a handful of ceramic vessels and just two pieces that employ electronic components.

Those are by the prolific Chris Combs, who shows often locally. The more striking of the two is “S(p)lash,” a long, skinny LED matrix set at a diagonal. Within the piece’s skinny confines, pixels conjure watery motion. The ever-changing display can merely suggest ripples and waves but sometimes depicts such recognizable features as a waterfall. Oddly, this high-tech fabrication is the show’s most bucolic entry.

Among the other better-known participants are Pat Goslee, Helen Zughaib, Anne Bouie and Ceci Cole McInturff. Goslee makes vibrant semi-abstractions that encompass representational imagery such as the stenciled flowers of “Natural State.” The Beirut-born Zughaib’s contributions include a black-and-white mandala of concentric rings interspersed with the Arabic words for “peace” and “home” inscribed repeatedly in circular calligraphy. Bouie and McInturff incorporate biological relics — a deer skull and bird wings, respectively — into assemblages that possess a talismanic power.

Two commentaries on Black lives draw on very different references and strike highly divergent tones. Trei Ramsey’s “Botchperation” is a parody of the game in which players remove plastic parts from the cavities of a cartoonish body. In the artist’s update, the Black patient’s ailments include “unemployment,” “police brutality” and “food insecurity.” Neville Barbour’s account of his grandmother’s flight from Georgia, “Leaving,” is more elegiac. It packs a drawing and a collage on opposite sides of an evocatively antique suitcase.

If many of the show’s artworks portray actual sites, whether contemporary or long-abandoned, a few imagine places that are all the more alluring for being impossible. Abol Bahadori’s print-painting hybrids depict scenes that are simultaneously inside and outside: stairs and hallways overlaid with garden imagery and splashed with vibrant pink and turquoise. Zofie King’s elegant mixed-media drawings inset ornate architectural interiors into the bodies of bats, nestling grand entrances between the animals’ tiny wings. Her intricate compositions lead the eye into spaces even more shadowy and obscure than the Union Station Greyhound depot.

If you go

The District 51 Art Show

Touchstone Gallery, 901 New York Ave. NW. touchstonegallery.com. 202-682-4125.

Dates: Through Feb. 9.

Prices: Free.