

In the galleries: Renaissance techniques with a modern twist

Latin American artists tweak classical images for commentary on emotions, identity and beauty

Review by Mark Jenkins

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Since they emphasize Latin American feminist and political art, the exhibitions organized by RoFA Projects are frequently edgy. Jagged edges, literal and metaphorical, abound in “In the Heart of the Beholder,” the first show in RoFA’s new gallery. Yet there’s a neoclassical element to the 10-artist array, which features multiple examples of Renaissance-derived imagery.

Of these, the most traditional are by Spanish painter Salustiano, whose delicate, almost-photorealist renderings of heads and shoulders are contained inside single-color circles. The artist’s vivid reds are made from crushed cochineal beetles, an authentic Renaissance technique that links his work to European colonialism, since the bugs were originally brought to Spain from conquered territories in Central America.

Walterio Iraheta ironically updates such paintings as Rembrandt’s “The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp” by populating them with figurines from McDonald’s Happy Meals. These monochromatic vignettes — some painted, some photographed — are based on toys available in El Salvador stores that sell secondhand U.S. goods. Thus they’re a pointed reminder of the influence on the artist’s homeland of its powerful neighbor to the north.

Mexican artist Fabian Ugalde draws directly from Old Master paintings, but gives them a computerized tweaking. He digitally remixes such well-known pictures as Vermeer’s “Girl With a Pearl Earring” so they’re recognizable from a distance yet revealed as eerily dissected when viewed closely. The Vermeer subject’s mouth, nose and eyes, which look merely blurry from across the room, are actually multiple identical images grouped together in clumps.

Also trickily photographic, if more personal, are Cecilia Paredes’s self portraits. The artist, who divides her time between Philadelphia and her native Peru, nearly vanishes into ornamental backdrops by covering most of her body with matching patterns. Among the decorative motifs are flowers, butterflies and sea creatures, which give the pictures ecological meaning. They’re about how an individual fits into, and yet remains separate from, her environment.

The show incorporates work by several artists RoFA has highlighted in the past, notably one who's definitely no classicist. Colombian street artist Erre derives her motifs — and energy — from punk rock, skateboarding and protest. Her stenciled renderings of defiant young women include and embody such apt mottoes as “Vivas Libres” (“live free”) and “Sin Miedo” (“fearless”).

In the Heart of the Beholder Through Aug. 13 at RoFA Art Gallery, 316 Main St., Kentlands, Gaithersburg.

Matt Neuman

In most of Matt Neuman's prints and paintings, neither the elaborate geometric designs nor the contrasting hot-and-cold colors appear to be derived from nature. Yet highly stylized versions of natural forms do make the occasional unanticipated appearance in “Pattern Recognition,” the New York artist's Long View Gallery show. Many of the eye-popping abstract pictures are inside wooden frames, some of them X-shaped but others rounded and a few with the symmetrical contours of a streamlined butterfly.

Symmetry is crucial to Neuman, whose style recalls both 1960s op art and the same decade's acid-rock graphics, but is more precise and painstaking than either. Often the artist's motifs are doubled so they mirror each other like twinned sets of laser-etched circuits. The frequent use of metallic inks and pigments also gives the oscillating images an industrial quality, even when the designs are clearly modeled on leafy plants or hint at snakeskin scales. Whatever their inspirations, Neuman's pictures are visual machines that both engross and propel the viewer's eye.

Matt Neuman: Pattern Recognition Through Aug. 7 at Long View Gallery, 1234 Ninth St. NW.

Abdulahman Naanseh

Arabic calligraphy is central to Abdulrahman Naanseh's drawings and paintings, but the works in his “Pressure/Movement/Effect” are not texts meant for reading. The Syrian native's recent work takes the Arabic versions of the three title words — chosen for their relevance to calligraphy, but also to politics — and then spins, swoops and fragments them into abstract compositions. Naanseh is artist-in-residence at George Mason University, which is exhibiting his work at its Arlington location; the show will relocate to the main campus in a few weeks.

Most of the show's artworks were made on paper with watery inks, whether black or brightly colored. Some compositions group pen strokes into such tight clusters that the resulting shapes are almost entirely filled in; others use ink so sparingly that the thin-threaded strokes are mostly air.

Also on display are five vivid paintings in which calligraphic loops and curves serve as backdrops. The brushstrokes on the primary level are partly overpainted, with larger gestures outlined in reverse above them. This complex layering exemplifies Naanseh's style, which simultaneously sustains and fractures tradition.

Abdulahman Naanseh: Pressure/Movement/Effect Through Aug. 6 at Mason Exhibitions Arlington, 3601 Fairfax Dr., Arlington, and Aug. 22 to Oct. 15 at Gillespie Gallery of Art, George Mason University, 4400 University Dr., Fairfax.

Fleurette Estes

There are many close-ups of materials and tools in Fleurette Estes's photo essay "Behind the Loom: The Legacy, Heritage & Resilience of Navajo Weaving." Yet the Lost Origins Gallery show celebrates the landscape as much as the culture with its pictures and text by Estes, a Texas-based artist who spent some of her childhood on the Navajo Nation reservation. Its territory includes Monument Valley, a red-rocked expanse of craggy plateaus and towering buttes in southeastern Utah.

The landscape is suitably prominent, by itself or as a dramatic backdrop to foregrounded looms in Estes's crisp, colorful pictures. One photo, "Loom in the Wind," cannily employs an upright weaving device as a frame for a sweeping vista, viewed partly through strands of strung yarn. Shot on Fuji film, the pictures feature vivid blues and turquoises as well as the earth tones of the land and scrubby grass.

Estes's project was inspired by her stepmother and sister, both renowned Navajo weavers, and partly funded by the Focus on the Story Emerging Storyteller Grant. The proceeds from this show will benefit Adopt-a-Native-Elder, one of whose programs provides yarn to older weavers.

Fleurette Estes: Behind the Loom: The Legacy, Heritage & Resilience of Navajo Weaving Through Aug. 7 at Lost Origins Gallery, 3110 Mt. Pleasant St. NW.