Washington Color School Remix

MODERNISM at the Corcoran

Artomatic

Ira Cohen
E. Ethelbert Miller
John Hanshaw of Guerrilla Filmfest

plus Abbe Lowell • Nethers • Dawn of Man • Buck Downs • Hiram Larew • Miles David Moore
letter from the publisher

Phoenix Rising

I love, love, love spring in DC. I knew it was here when I witnessed three harbingers. The first, was a tree full of robins. The second, the deciduous Magnolia blooming, and finally, during the third week of March I saw all I needed to see. The crocus, daffodils, and hyacinth were up. I have officially declared it! Rebirth! Everything is new again. Spring has arrived and with it, Washington once again has a new art magazine!

I want to welcome all to this, the first edition of urbancode magazine. As you can see it’s a little different from a print magazine—and it’s a little the same. I thank all of you who have enthusiastically embraced this project by being its first subscribers, and I want to profusely thank the dedicated contributors who have made urbancode possible.

You, the reader, will come to recognize some very talented people on our staff who will be contributing on a regular basis, just as I have come to realize their talent. Further, if I may, I want to thank urbancode’s backbone, its copyeditors, for theirs’ is somewhat of a thankless position, but they have my undying gratitude.

In this first issue of urbancode you will find many surprises, and some not so surprising inclusions as well. April is a month full of events in the Washington art scene and urbancode is right there with an astute review of the Modernism exhibit at the Corcoran by Geoff Hoppe. The Color School gets a much deserved look at the summer-long calendar of retrospective and contemporary events, and the 60’s psychedelic era is revisited through Allan Graubard’s essay on famed photographer Ira Cohen’s ground-breaking mylar photographs. Also, April is Artomatic month! I’ll take a look at the controversial art extravaganza and note a few things they have done right.

Throughout the year urbancode plans to provide you with many insightful interviews and profiles and this months issue kicks off with a conversation with DC Poet Extraordinaire E. Ethelbert Miller who speaks with Eli Resnick about what makes him tick, and guerrilla film festival organizer John Hanshaw talks to Russell Nohelty about this years filmfest. Plus poetry pages, music profiles and reviews, and much, much more!

So please, enjoy the magazine. I believe the best is yet to come!

Stuart Greenwell
Publisher/Editor-in-Chief/ Designer

The publisher standing in front of one of the dozens of his paintings destroyed in a January 3rd, 2003 studio fire.

Woo Hoo! Happy New Year!
FILMFEST DC
Washington’s international Film Festival
Filmfest DC, Washington’s international Film Festival will kick off its 21st annual festivities this spring with a mix of films representing over 30 countries. Participating films will encompass a global range of cultures, music, and politics from a diverse collection of nations. This year’s 11-day festival, running from April 19-29, will feature more than 80 films, and a variety of special events, international guest directors and panels. For the first time, screenings will take place primarily in one venue, located at 4000 Wisconsin Avenue, NW, which will allow film enthusiasts easy access to the festival’s many offerings.

There will also be programs free of charge for children and senior citizens. Filmfest DC’s Opening Night Gala will feature La Vie en Rose, the new feature highlighting the life of celebrated French enchantress Edith Piaf. Director Olivier Dahan will attend the screening. The festival will close with Paris, Je T’aime with French star Fanny Ardant introducing her latest work.

Tickets for most screenings are $9 and can be purchased at www.tickets.com or by calling 800-955-5566. The Filmfest DC public information line is 202-628-8671, and its Web site is www.filmfestdc.org.

ARTDC.ORG
Building Bridges
If you’ve never checked it out, have a look at Jesse Cohen’s site artDC.org. It provides a service to the local art community and is rich with resources and information. Its stated mission is to “bridge communication between artists, galleries, and collectors through an online venue.” artDC.org promotes art communication with bulletin boards, automated galleries, and meetings.

The online forum contains powerful tools where visitors can share techniques, promote their works, and discuss many themes of art. Aiding cross-communication, will inspire new and different creative forces to blend. artDC.org gives individuals the opportunity to network and develop relationships with others, thus allowing community to develop.

The purpose of artDC.org is to aid in this process!” Well what more can we say? Check the site out at, where else, www.artdc.org.

BIG BRIDGE!
The online literary portal has a little bit of everything, well, literary. Poetry, an in-house press, a list of like-minded little magazines, fiction and non-fiction reviews. Great! How do they do it?
One of this urbancode’s nimble contributors, Allan Graubard, has a new online book out called Roma/Amor designed by this magazine’s humble publisher. Check it out because it truly is a GAS in that funky, beatnik, existential kind of way! You can find Big Bridge at http://www.bigbridge.org/bpress.htm and Allan Graubard’s book Roma/Amor can be read at http://www.bigbridge.org/roma-amor-by-allan-graubard-for-big-bridge.pdf.

WHAT’S A VRZHU?
VRZHU which stands for... “a new poetry press born of a conversation between poet friends who feel that there aren’t enough venues for poetry to be published.” It’s first two books are More Than Anything by Hiram Larew (read some of his work in this edition of urbancode), and The Kimnana by Kim Roberts, which is inspired by travels throughout northern India. VRZHU is looking for poets and “believe every syllable is the first syllable of spring.” Sound like a nice bunch, don’t they?
Contact them at info@vrzhu.com or check out their web site at www.vrzhu.com.

RICHMOND’S 1708 GALLERY NEARLY BURNS
A rash of fires in the Richmond region nearly claimed the alternative, non-profit 1708 Gallery on Broad Street in downtown Richmond on March 11th. A three-alarm blaze engulfed an adjacent building, but did not result in any fatalities.
“ This is probably one of the biggest fires we’ve had this year,” said Richmond Fire and Emergency Services Department spokesman Lt. Keith Vida. Fortunately, the building was vacant, but its blaze left some smoke and water damage to the nearby art space. It took 50 firefighters using 12 trucks nearly three hours to get the fire under control.
INTERNATIONAL ART FAIR COMES TO DC

DC makes its foray into the world of international art dealers this April 27-30 when the First Annual Modern and Contemporary Art fair arrives at DC's convention center, Hall E, which is represented by Conner contemporary, Andrea Pollan's Curator's Office, Robert Fox, a fiery redhead with intense energy and emerging trends by emerging artists, including Jane Haslem.

artDC/CS is a special projects area where visitors can discover today's hottest trends by emerging artists, including "Another Look: New Art from Shanghai," a curated exhibition of contemporary artists from Shanghai working in a variety of media. A unique new media installation area. Space provides a large-scale video lounge & bar featuring virtual and internet art projects by regional artists selected by artDC and Flashpoint. Many of the region's non-profit spaces and institutions will be present in the fair as well, some with curated exhibitions.

A benefit will take place on the evening of Thursday April 26—ticket prices are $100 (Too rich for my blood) during the first two hours of the evening from 5:30 to 7:30 when drinks and hors d'oeuvres will be served, and $30 from 7:30 to 9:30 with a cash bar. Tickets may be ordered by calling 312-587-8124 or by email: jhanosh@dc-artfair.com. artDC has partnered with the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington as the fair's preview night beneficiary. In addition, artDC proudly presents a series of panel discussions titled ArTalks, featuring many local museum directors, curators, scholars and artists-speaking on a variety of timely topics. Many of the City's museums and arts institutions will collaborate with artDC as part of an enriching education program. This program will include seminars, special tours and off-site activities throughout the four-day fair. For a detailed schedule of times and dates for these activities are posted on the artDC website: www.dc-artfair.com.

The Washington Convention Center is located at 801 Mount Vernon Place, NW. Show hours are Friday through Sunday, April 27-29 from 11 a.m. until 7 p.m. and on Monday, April 30, from 11 a.m. until 5 p.m. Admission is free Friday. All other days general admission is $12, $8 for groups of 10 or more and $6 for seniors and students. For additional information and regular updates, visit their website at www.dc-artfair.com.

CALL FOR ENTRIES

"RED"

I intend to choose artists who interpret the theme in a wide variety of ways, from purely abstract works to highly narrative pieces, often charged with social/political commentary—imagine that. The theme is not simply about the color red—as in copper red glazes or some commercial cone 06 oxidation bright red—as I am seeking more “red meat” for this exhibition. So, this isn’t just about color. It’s about feeling as well as seeing red, it’s about the liquid of life and the liquid of death, it’s about leftist politics and it’s about courage and it’s about Christmas—in a Santa Claus sort of way. It’s also about one third of the American flag and nearly all of the Chinese flag, and finally, it’s about empire and it’s about hell. The parameters are wide open. Interpret it as you will, as I know you will, in your own unique way.”

For Additional Information, please contact: Forrest Snyder, Director of Artistic Programs Baltimore Clayworks 5707 Smith Avenue Baltimore, MD 21209 410-578-1919 x18 forrest.snyder@baltimoreclayworks.org

Entry forms are available from their website at: http://baltimoreclayworks.org/forms/RedProspectus8.5x11.pdf.

CALL FOR ARTISTS

EXHIBIT OPPORTUNITIES
AT HOWARD COUNTY CENTER FOR THE ARTS

The Howard County Center for the Arts, a 27,000 square foot facility located in Elliott City, Maryland, is seeking proposals from artists and curators nation-wide for solo and group exhibits for the 2008-2009 gallery season. All original artwork in any media, including installations, will be considered for the general review. The Arts Council is also accepting slide submissions for two specific upcoming exhibits: Illuminations (working title), a juried exhibit of artworks with light/illumination as the primary medium, and an untitled exhibit of book arts.

Work previously shown at the Center will not be accepted for review, nor will work previously submitted to the gallery be reviewed. Call 410-313-2787 for an application. Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis, however, deadlines to be included in the next two reviews are October 15, 2007 and April 15, 2008.

The Center’s two galleries total over 2000 square feet, with galleries, including installations, will be reviewed. Call 410-578-1919 x18 —in a Santa Claus sort of way. It’s also about one third of the American flag and nearly all of the Chinese flag, and finally, it’s about empire and it’s about hell. The parameters are wide open. Interpret it as you will, as I know you will, in your own unique way.”

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Modernism
Designing a New World, 1914-1939

by GEOFF HOPPE

Even before you’ve entered the gallery, the Corcoran’s new exhibit Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914—1939 is more interesting than a lot of museum exhibitions. From the sidewalk of 17th Street, the passerby looks through the bay of glass doors and stares into a face that’s a cross between an insect and an electric shaver. Upon entry, you learn the enigmatic visage belongs to a Tatra 77a, a rare (and still working), 1938 Czech automobile; a superb, futuristic marriage of form and function.

The car isn’t the only item that lures the passerby in. Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring drifts enigmatically down from the next floor. Fourteen reproductions of Gerrit Rietvald’s Red Blue Chairs flank the marble staircase leading to the exhibit’s opening.

At the top of the stairs, the viewer is met with a scale model of Vladimir Tatlin’s magnificent Monument to the 3rd International stretching hopefully, jeeringly, toward the neo-classical dome.

The juxtaposition of Stravinsky and Tatlin, Tatra and Rietvald, against the Corcoran’s neoclassic pillars and domes has a spellbinding effect.
One of Modernism’s best qualities is its dizzying juxtaposition of Stravinsky and Tatlin, Tatra and Rietveld, against the Corcoran’s neoclassic pillars. It seems to transform the building into a living argument between Modernism’s chaotic, violent utopianism, and the tradition and history the movement sought to overthrow. Even without explanation, anyone from the novice to the professional critic would understand the struggles and aspirations of Modern art thanks to this brilliant use of gallery space. MOMA, eat your heart out.

Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914—1939 is the new exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery of Art that opened March 17th and runs through July 29th. This ambitious show makes its only American stop here in Washington, after runs at the Victoria and Albert Museums in London and MARTA Herford in Germany. Organizing a single show about “Modernism” — an umbrella term that presupposes a multiplicity of movements and concerns — is about as easy as herding cats. All the more surprising, then, that the Corcoran has put together an enlightening, brilliant exhibit that informs while it entertains.

One of Modernism’s best qualities is its dizzying variety of media. This comprehensive collection includes everything from Cubist paintings to a full-size reproduction of a Bauhaus kitchen. The variety is one factor among many that makes the exhibition imminently accessible: this is a show for the novice and the fan alike. The information that accompanies the works of art is carefully chosen to inform the reader of general ideas while simultaneously highlighting facts that reveal familiar works of art with their original immediacy. The primary color grids of Mondrian, for instance, have been featured on everything from cocktail dresses to Spongebob cartoons, but few visitors probably know that Piet Mondrian regarded his deceptively simple constructions as “visual translations of the principles of Theosophy, a form of philosophical mysticism popular at the time.” The works are presented as interrelated, adding to the comprehensive impression the show creates. The pieces are organized in a manner that captures the conflicting multiplicity of Modernist visions.

Conflicting movements and ideologies are positioned close to each other, mimicking powerful dynamism that has made Modernist art so tumultuous and exciting. The Cubist room gives way to the Futurist room, who weren’t all too fond of the Cubists. The space dedicated to the worldly, technocratic, Futurists is succeeded by “Spiritual Utopia,” a section that investigates the metaphorical importance of the show. The otherworldly geometry of spiritual utopianism is next door to the urban-inspired straight lines and dynamic planes of Constructivism. The hard lines and clean angles of the De Stijl room are mere steps away from the graceful, curvilinear world of Purism. There’s even a serpentine wall in the Purist space that mimics Le Corbusier while directing the viewer’s course through the gallery. At times, this design ventures into kitsch, as with the sheet metal paneling in “The Machine” gallery that addresses the modernist fascination with “lordship” and assembly line production. Kitschy, perhaps, but still striking, and a little provocative.

Rooms are dedicated to specific movements, like the famous Bauhaus school, events, like the Weissenhof Housing Exhibition, and also to general themes, like the Modernist fascination with nature, or the role of theater and performance art. An “American Salon” houses several beautiful pieces by Dove, Blumner, Maurer, and the like, but feels empty compared with the show’s other sections. The only medium displayed in the American Salon is painting, and one feels the organizers missed an opportunity in not displaying significant American Utopian works such as Brook Farm or, more relevantly, B.F. Skinner’s frightening Walden Two. There are already numerous examples of print media in the show that reinforce the relevance and importance of modernism, including original editions of dystopian masterpieces like George Orwell’s 1984 and Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World.

The inclusion of Walden Two would be disconcerting, though, and a lone criticism of an otherwise flawless exhibit is the Corcoran’s seeming reticence to address that disconcerting, darker face of Modernism. If the show’s enthusiasm and neutral attitude towards politics makes it accessible and educational, the downside is that there are no downsides. The museum’s explanation of the Futurist movement, for instance, says Marinetti and his circle wanted to “abandon” past traditions. “Abandon” hardly captures the fury of F.T. Marinetti’s 1908 “Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism:” “We will destroy museums, libraries, and fight against moralism, feminism, and all utilitarian cowardice.” True, Marinetti and his colleagues had a keen appreciation of sensation and showmanship, but he proved that statement’s integrity when he took a prominent post in Benito Mussolini’s fascist government. In the Constructivist room, the Corcoran’s explanation declares, “... in 1917, the Russian Revolution had established the first worker-controlled state in modern Europe.” One wonders if any workers felt that way when confronted by Lenin’s secret police thugs.

Especially enlightening is the copy on the walls in the “National Modernisms” room, a space that addresses the official uses of Modernist motifs by governments at the time. “Throughout the 1920s,” it reads, “Modernism had been associated with progressive causes and left wing politics. However, its visual language proved surprisingly adaptable and in the 1930s it was taken up by various political systems, including repressive dictatorships.” Doesn’t the “surprising adaptability” of the “visual language” presuppose some uncomfortable similarities between the Modernists and the governments their styles buttressed? In the Weissenhof Housing Exhibition room, for instance, there’s an illuminating Willi Baumeister lithograph. The image shows a stiflingly roccoco living room on an onyx background with a bright red “X” scrawled across it, as if the gesture could erase the hated heritage pictured. Accompanying this image is the provocative phrase “wie wollen?” (how to live?) The violent, unthinking negation implied by the poster is eerily reminiscent of fascist attitudes. Despite this sole criticism, Designing a New World is a fantastic show. Intellectual yet approachable, slick without being arrogant, and filled with the exuberant joy all true education should impart. It’s a worthy new beginning for a museum wanting to claim its place among the big names in the art world. With Modernism, that claim already has plenty to back it up.
Color School Redux

ColorField Remix
An Area-Wide Art Celebration
April - July 2007
Various venues and times
Stuart Greenwell

More than 30 Washington area museums, galleries, arts organizations and businesses are participating in ColorField Remix, the largest celebration of painting ever held in the Washington area and the first true look at the painters who made the Washington Color School a ubiquitous presence in this city.

This long overdue event honors the Washington Color School artists, as well as the Color Field visual art movement. I say long overdue because Washington has, at times, been ambivalent about the shadow that the Color School’s presence has cast over the local art scene throughout the years.

For some artists, the Washington Color School had been considered a movement to be actively disassociated with—subsequently for a period of time its accomplishments were all but forgotten. Indeed, only Gene Davis and Morris Louis have enjoyed anything akin to a retrospective look at the works that put Washington on the art world map. This year’s Hirshhorn show of Morris’ paintings is part of a traveling exhibition that will be the first consideration of his works since 1986.

ColorField Remix was conceived by The Kreeger Museum, whose director Judy A. Greenberg states that “the number of organizations participating in this celebration is evidence of how profoundly the Color Field movement permeated the consciousness of Washington’s cultural life in its time, and how it continues to sustain and inspire artists today.” True enough, but there have been periods, and various curators, who could not have had less respect or more disdain for the progenitors of Washington’s only international Color Field art movement. It is refreshing that the current climate sees the validity in their works.

The influence of the Color school Painters in Washington cannot be overstated when considering the generation of artists who attended the Corcoran School of Art during the 1970’s to mid-eighties. During that time, Gene Davis was considered by many to be something of a shaman or a Guru, one who would hold court in his classroom several times a week to a rapt group of aspiring artists and Sunday painters. He, with his shaved head, had a presence larger than that of any Washington artist I have ever known since.

Still, Davis could be very acerbic, and sometimes petty if you were not a member of his “club.” Those were different times indeed.
Leon Berkowitz, always considered either an “unofficial” member of the WCS, or, if you were to ask him, not a member at all, was more of a factor in terms of the artistic growth of the city’s artists. Leon would host get-togethers at The Childe Harold, where he and many of his students would talk about all things art related. He was big into the notion that Washington needed a cohesive arts community. That fact was established in 1945 when he and his wife, the poet Ida Fox Berkowitz, founded the Washington Workshp Center for the Arts. This, it could be argued, would be the catalyst for what was later to become the Washington Color School—the Center being a meeting ground for the likes of Morris Louis, Gene Davis and Kenneth Noland.

By the end of the seventies, painting was declared “Dead” by art critics. That was when Leon Berkowitz wrote about his Color Field movement. In May, a public art project directed by the Corcoran College of Art and Design and the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities will have students paint stripes on Eighth Street between D and E streets NW. The project was inspired by the 1987 commemorative street painting in honor of Gene Davis’ work.

For a complete list of events see the sidebar at the end of this article or see the ColorField Remix website at: http://www.washington.org/colorfieldremix/participants.cfm

### April Events

- **Apr. 1 - Sep. 15**  
  Thomas Downing: 1963 - 1976, Addison/Ripley Fine Art
- **Apr. 5 - May 17**  
  The Cat Has A Finger: Works by Peter Fox, KNEW Gallery
- **Apr. 5 - May 27**  
  Color Field School Silkscreen Prints with Lou Stovall, Prada Gallery
- **Apr. 6 - May 19**  
  Selected Works from the Estate of Gene Davis, Marsha Mateyka Gallery
- **Apr. 9 - Jun. 9**  
  Fieldwork by Inga Frick & Gillian Brown, Pyramid Atlantic
- **Apr. 10 - Jun. 28**  
  Looking Into Color: The Paintings of Leon Berkowitz, The Washington Arts Museum
- **Apr. 11 - 29**  
  Color with Interaction, Meat Market Gallery
- **Apr. 11 - May 26**  
  Paul Reed, A Retrospective, Osuna Gallery
- **Apr. 12 - Jul. 29**  
  ColorField remix @ Heineman Myers Gallery from WPA/C’s ArtFile, WPA/C
- **Apr. 12 - Jul. 29**  
  ColorField remix @ Heineman Myers Gallery
- **Apr. 14**  
  Color Field School Silkscreen Prints with Lou Stovall, Prada Gallery
- **Apr. 14 - May 26**  
  Remembrance: A Media Project by Alberto Gaitain, Curator’s Office
- **Apr. 14 - May 26 J**  
  Jason Gubbiotti: Wrong Way to Paradise, Hemphill
- **Apr. 14 - May 26 L**  
  Leon Berkowitz: The Cathedral Series, Hemphill
- **Apr. 14 - May 26**  
  Portia Munson: Pink Project, Hemphill
- **Apr. 14 - Jul. 31**  
  Howard Mehring: All-Overs, Conner Contemporary Art
- **Apr. 14 - May 26**  
  The Feedback Series: Videos by Dissident Display at Viridian Restaurant, Curator’s Office
- **Apr. 15 - Jun. 8**  
  Washington Color School: Selections from the Artery Collection, Hillyer Art Space
- **Apr. 16**  
  Ginni Serrano: All-Overs, Conner Contemporary Art
- **Apr. 17**  
  Color Field School Silkscreen Prints with Lou Stovall, Prada Gallery
- **Apr. 18 - May 13**  
  Color: Field Tests, Nevin Kelly Gallery
- **Apr. 19**  
  Educators’ Workshop, The Kreeger Museum-Workshop
- **Apr. 20 - May 16**  
  Washington Color - The Next Generation, Alla Rogers Gallery
- **Apr. 21**  
  Painting Color Fields (Age 8-12), The Kreeger Museum-Workshop
- **Apr. 25**  
  WPAC Experimental Media Series: ColorField remix, Night 1, WPA/C
- **Apr. 25 - May 19**  
  Don McCarten, Studio Gallery
- **Apr. 25 - 29**  
  ColorField remix @ Heineman Myers Gallery from WPA/C’s ArtFile, WPA/C
- **Apr. 27 - 30**  
  Dyeing: A Media Project by Alberto Gaitain, Curator’s Office
- **Apr. 28**  
  Artist Talk: Carol Brown Goldberg, The Kreeger Museum-Lecture/Discussion
- **Apr. 28**  
  She’s Like a Rainbow: Colors in Fashion, The Textile Museum-Lecture/Discussion
- **Apr. 29**  
  Panel discussion on the Color Field movement, artDC-Lecture/Discussion
- **Apr. 30**  
  The Art of Food, the Twelfth Epicurean Food & Wine Auction Gala Dinner, Les Dames d’Escoffier

All of Washington’s “art elite” were in attendance, as well as a couple of shy art students that I “know.” Since then, however, much of the WCS’s work has been in moth balls, especially Berkowitz’s delicate paintings. Because of their condition, as well as “other reasons,” you don’t see many of Leon’s works. I was pleasantly surprised to walk into Charles Cowles a half dozen years ago or so and see a Davis painting adorning the wall directly behind the reception desk. Sadly, it struck me as some what odd that I would see the piece in New York. Sure, there are Davies about, and many can be seen in office buildings and doctor’s offices around the city, but it just seems to me that Davis’ work, like the rest of the city’s painting heritage, should be more consciously ubiquitous. Anything less obscures the context of their contributions to Washington-area art. I know of many an artist still working in Washington who, like myself, were taught by these men. Their legacy however, is undeniable, it goes deeper than a few paintings on a museum wall—it is part of the very fabric of many Washington artists still working in the city today. This month, and throughout the summer, much will be accomplished to right this lack of contextual perspective by the events occurring as a part of ColorField Remix.

Some of the other happenings scheduled for this summer include exhibitions by younger artists working with color, such as D.C. ex-patriot Jason Gubbiotti and Portia Munson at Hemphill Fine Arts. The Montpelier Arts Center in Laurel will feature contemporary African-American regional painters who have been influenced by the Color Field movement. In May, a public
Leon Berkowtiz: Looking Into Light

PEPCO's Edison Place Gallery
701 Ninth St. NW (entrance on Eighth Street)
Washington, DC
April 9 through June 28.
Noon-4 p.m., Tuesdays-Fridays
202-872-3396

BY REBECCA CRUMLISH

This exhibit of the late artist Leon Berkowtiz, curated by the Washington Arts Museum, serves as a fitting introduction to the work of an important Washington artist to those who may not have known him, as well as a reminder of his career to those who did. In 1945 Berkowtiz was co-founder of the Washington Workshop Center, which brought together Morris Louis, Howard Mehring, and others who became the vanguard of a movement soon to be known as the “Washington Color School.” While these artists went on to fame and shows in prestigious New York galleries in the fifties and sixties, Berkowtiz left Washington to live and work abroad. While his work was not strictly a part of the “Color School”, one cannot look at this exhibit of paintings from 1953 to 1978 and not be struck by the artist’s overwhelming concern for color.

Upon his return to Washington in the sixties, Berkowtiz began to explore what he called, “color as light.” In “Galilee,” a work from 1965, bold horizontal stripes of green, magenta, and reds begin to bleed into each other. By 1969, in “Harp String,” we see the hard edged stripe, used sparingly, become a focal point. Reviewing this period, one can discern the influences of Gene Davis, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko, but eventually Berkowtiz developed a signature style which, while evoking these other artists, was distinctively his own.

By the time he painted “Dualities” in 1971, no traces of the stripes remained. A glowing center draws the viewer into the picture, and the contrasting colors at the edges of the painting act almost as a sort of foreground. It is in the series “Seven Lights,” from 1975, that Berkowtiz best conveys his mystical side. Five large paintings placed side-by-side show a progression evolving, with subtle changes like that of a sunrise or sunset growing and fading. The paintings themselves seem to generate light.

Berkowtiz exhibited frequently during his lifetime at the Corcoran, the Phillips Collection, and top commercial galleries in DC. It is wonderful to have a chance to see his works again, after such a long absence from the District art scene. His return is part of a citywide salute to the Washington Color School. This exhibit continues until June 29.

Enter
38”x49”, 1957

Unities #31
Oil on Canvas 64”x86”, 1973
Not included in exhibit
Whatever your opinion—and the opinions run the gamut—Artomatic has been, and remains, one of the most high profile events in the Washington art community. The press bashes it, established artists forgo it, and the vast majority of its participants are unheard of, dubiously skilled, or just plain in it for the fun. However, every Artomatic has also produced a few bright prospects that burst onto the scene like so many paint-smeared Kelly Clarksons.
Artomatic provides an opportunity for artists who for various reasons haven’t had much, if any, exposure. There are those who argue its egalitarian manifesto levels the playing field, thereby creating a more dynamic art scene. Then there are those, myself included, who feel that an art event short of much artifice is hardly an “art” event. Why? Because this ugly duckling gets so much attention. It is the ultimate slap in the so-called serious art scene’s face that even the “hottest show” of the “highest” order that the commercial galleries mount, gets only a small fraction of the play that Artomatic does. Another of its benefits is that most commercial galleries and curators, from Washington and elsewhere, visit Artomatic. Why? Because I think that most art professionals, like the rest of us, enjoy Artomatic—it’s fun, it’s an “event,” and frankly, if they didn’t at least take a peek, it would seem unsupportive of the local arts and its artists. So the possibility that some lucky artist will get seen by the right pair of eyes has some truth to it. Frankly, the art scene hasn’t been all that much fun as of late and if for that one reason alone, Artomatic must be seen as a success. Fun isn’t such a bad goal, is it?

Perhaps Artomatic’s greatest accomplishment is that its planners continue to find a suitable venue. Though some have found the previous locations challenging, the truth is that it’s next to impossible to find a structure filling the requirements that are needed to pull an event of this magnitude off. DC’s hot real estate market has made it almost impossible to find the needed 100,000 to 150,000 square feet of space that is in extremely short supply due to this city’s very nature. Because of this, Artomatic 2007, the fifth since 1999, will be held not in DC but in Crystal City, Virginia.

So if not by pure artistic merit, then by what criteria should Artomatic be judged? Well it doesn’t purport to be anything other than what it is—and that is a chance for anyone to show their “art.” It’s an opportunity for the inexperienced or emerging artist to nudge their way into the greater art scene by giving them a little art world exposure, a little confidence, a little camaraderie, and perhaps a little glimpse into how the art scene can be further navigated. For others it might just provide a reality check.

So is it really fair to judge Artomatic otherwise?

Most significantly, what Artomatic does is persevere. Each event, against many odds, continues to attract not only hundreds of participants but also tens of thousands of visitors. Regardless of your definition of success, it’s hard to argue with numbers like those.
... something visionary and with a certain flair for the theatrical ...

They would gather at his loft, friends and acquaintances in the know—poets, painters, dancers, musicians, actors, set designers, costume makers and more—simply to play, to initiate the “great adventure” of the “play.” He had built the Mylar Chamber—16 large wooden panels hinged together; eight sets of doubled panels—and hung dichro and color spots to define the stage. They would don elaborate costumes, fabricate masks or make up with cosmetics to distill the essence of rococo estrangement. From Marvel Comic Book heroes—Baron Mordo, Electromagnet, Dr. Strange—and swordplay movies seen at random in Chinatown, to his work with Jack Smith, the Velvet Underground, the ever-fecund audacity provoked by psychotropics, and more, they founded the ambiance that marked them.

Here they would evolve, day by day, a social space for a hidden theater given over to rituals played with all the grace of explorers on the run; poet explorers inventing for themselves a parallel reality despite and because of the games they lived. If a certain form of artistic desperation found its haven here, so did the magnificence, humor and contretemps of commedia dell’arte. If demons rose here to command with mock attack, so did erotic allurements embrace in sibylline flight. If the reflected image suddenly burst into stunningly complex, but no less apt, portraits of the created cast, conjured from a gesture caught in mid-arc, so did the sensibility of objective revelations. If in the sweet chaos of momentous fun the players found their doubles equal to themselves, so did they find themselves equal to their fantasies.

If from the Mylar Chamber several fates blossomed, having recognized themselves no where better, and in whose arc years later they would still refer the several truths and illusions they discovered or reaffirmed or cast off along the way, and that made them what they are - those still with us—and were—those not—so does their genius in doing so compel us.

The ritual theater of hallucination was not, and can never be, a solitary dwelling place. Nor is there anything obscure in this theater. In the images that Ira Cohen has returned to us as witness, we find a privileged place, where the hallucinations we hold of ourselves, our friends and our enemies, find us amidst their reflections.

Madness is not the apotheosis of reality by hallucination, but the eradication of reality from the hallucinations we have, however subtly or tenderly or brutally they appear to us.

Play conducts the camera to freeze the action at first, and an entire oeuvre lifts from the encounter. Then the photographer integrates time and movement into the moment that flow ers from the photo. And we have come full circle. From play to photo to film, the Mylar Chamber endures—as ephemeral as it is eternal; their time then, our time now.

And left with the film, we are not left alone. The Invasion of Thunderbolt Pagoda is an invitation, but an invitation that acts like a poem. I don’t know how it is for you but when I read a poem that moves me, it also moves me to respond; to write my own poem with words and gestures, with colors and sound. The film is no different. Go ahead, it says, take off your face and put on that mask. The doors to the marvelous pagoda are open . . .

To purchase DVD: (sold out, in print June 1)
youtube clip: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOWWh66z6wL8
Shimmied tightly between the Mid-City Fish Market and Carl's Barber Shop on P Street, it's no wonder that the Transformer gallery is aching for nature. Spring has been fetchingly calling and the four artists showcased in Transformer's Natural (dis)Order, Señor Tangcito, Jessica Cebra, Christine Buckton Tillman, and Chad Yencer, have something to say in response. Who rules the roost, the ever-formidable man or his persistent and predictable foe, nature? In this case, it depends on whom you ask.

The crème de la crème of Natural (dis)Order is Señor Tangcito's Sweet Installation. The assemblage, a series of panels and constructed elements, is offset by an abstracted mountain range painted on the gallery wall. The painstakingly crafted backdrop—a feat in itself—perfectly cradles Señor Tangcito's mixed media panels and the accompanying sculpturettes. The diorama-like installation narrates the artist's impressions of the South American culture he encountered while traveling in Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina, and it tells the story well. The tale is one that few have the opportunity to experience: living from the land, the cycle of mutual sustenance and vitality… until modernization and greed rear their ugly heads—in this case, exemplified by a car rambling down the mountainside bearing the words "tratado de encontrarse" ("treaty of encontrate") with a cheerful puff of tar-colored exhaust lying in its wake.

Both Jessica Cebra and Christine Buckton Tillman tap into the relative abandon and recklessness with which our society wields its power: power to consume, to produce and waste, to manipulate and destroy resources which will never be fully understood or regained. Cebra's series on view, The Gilded Geo, further embodies the clash between the natural and unnatural in restrained collage works of 2D and 3D varieties. The overall tone, while conveying an appreciation for the complexity of nature’s biological origins, is woeful and chaotic. Buckton Tillman's diminutive ceramics, made from slip-casting objects both natural and man-made, are at the same time dreamy and strange. Like Snow White’s poisoned apple, Cebra and Buckton Tillman speak in the native language of seductive and precious packages while laying their work with bittersweet messages of admonishment.

In an unexpected tryst of the natural and not, Chad Yencer uses the greatest gift of human advancement, Google, to access the nature that cannot be found outside his door. In The Spirit Animals series Yencer depicts those close to him as animals, but bases their representation on images found through Google’s search engine. Although well aware of the irony in his choices—using technology to access the natural world and associating idealized animal qualities with individual people—Yencer’s intent is to represent the animals without stylization, so the their character (and the character of their human counterparts) can be viewed clearly and without distraction. Unexpectedly, he succeeds. A definitive personality is evident in each of the animals. Despite Audubon and the numerous other documentary artists that have saturated our animal loving sensibilities (albeit with slightly different objectives), these nine paintings are truly enjoyable to view. Yencer, quite skilled in his trade, endows each creature with engaging and soulful eyes, so that you want to befriend the four-legged creatures and show them the natural and homey environment of your living room wall.

The subject matter is by no means fresh, but Natural (dis)Order is a well-balanced take on one of the oldest wars in history, that of man versus nature. Using a multitude of media, Señor Tangcito, Jessica Cebra, Christine Buckton Tillman, and Chad Yencer have produced intellectually based, high quality works that merit a trip indoors even on the most tempting of spring days. The gallery is open to the public Wednesday through Saturday from 1-7 pm and is located at 1401 P Street, NW.
An Interview with Poet E. Ethelbert Miller

by Eli Resnick
EZR: You describe yourself as a literary activist. How did you get that job title?

EEM: Well. I didn’t get that job title where I saw it advertised in the paper and I applied for it. I’m pretty much the way I like to describe myself when I’m introduced to audiences. It’s a definition I feel comfortable with.

By “literary activist,” I am defined the following three ways. One is, I put emphasis on the fact that I write. I am also concerned about the promotion of writers and the promotion of literary in our community. Third, I’m concerned about the preservation of literary history, so I’m very much concerned about what happens to writers’ papers.

I’m concerned about writers having wills. I’m concerned about a literary history having a certain material presence in a city, where you can walk down a street and you can know that a particular writer lives in a particular house because there’s a plaque there, or you see a writer whose face is in a mural. I want to make sure that that’s preserved.

So those are the three ways I define being a literary activist—three categories; writing, promotion and preservation. In terms of poetry, which is my love, poetry, promotion of others, and then preservation, so those are the three things.

I say that because I know so many other individuals who are poets or fiction writers whom I respect, but when I look at how their life is structured and my own life, I see a considerable difference. I don’t spend a whole lot of time writing. I don’t have a little cottage in the south of France, or go off on retreats. If I look at my at my, a lot of my time is spent dealing with political events or running programs or reading manuscripts. I wish I had more time to spend in writing or in doing workshops or reading poems. I wish I had more time to send out poems to different magazines, but this is the life that I’ve selected and I feel very happy with it.

EZR: In the last couple years, even though you’ve published more poems than a lot of people who consider themselves poets, you’ve focused a lot on the blog you keep at www.urbancode.com.

EEM: Yes. All my writing is available via that blog. The only exception is that I wrote a memoir. I’ve been concerned about how it would be accepted as a literary style. I wanted something that people of all ages could connect with and I think that’s what’s happening now, so I’m happy with that.

It makes it difficult for me to sit down and write the second memoir, though. I had outlined a second memoir before I started blogging and now one says “okay, what are you putting in a blog that you would put in a memoir? What would you have put in a blog that you wouldn’t put in a memoir?” All of a sudden, here I am with the poems. I have to see how I’ll adjust. Will I incorporate parts of the blog into the new memoir? I haven’t decided that yet.

EZR: What’s your First memoir about?

EEM: The first memoir is Fathering Words. That came out in 2000. That was a big success. In 2003 it was selected by the DC Read Program for the One City One Read program where you have various people around the city reading one book.

That was a big plug for it, so now when I look at the success of it—it’s a book that has been incorporated around the country in different classrooms—I feel I’ve written a book whose audience has increased as the years have passed, and I think that as a writer that’s what you’re happy about.

It might be difficult to set out to write that type of book. You know, when you look at the number of books that are published a year, they have a very short shelf-space-time, and that’s a problem. Many authors find it difficult many times to even read their early work or go back to their early work. It’s like musicians. You know, it was very difficult to get Miles Davis to perform something that he was doing in the fifties, because artists like to do that.

At the same time, when you create a work which begins to stand up and another generation of writers make reference to it, or something the people have said, there’s a literary reference to the book, then you realize you’ve done a good job. You always hope that literature is timeless, that somebody could pick up a memoir that I’ve written in another country or in another time, and it resonates.

When I look at my other books of poetry, that has not been the case. I cannot point to a book of poetry that is selling better than when it first came out.

EZR: You’ve tried to pick up on several different poets’ earlier work by putting together anthologies...? EEM: Yeah, I think that putting together anthologies—which I don’t think I’ll do now because unless you have a real staff, you wouldn’t undertake it. When I did Beyond the Frontier, that was the last anthology I did. I said I would never do that again because I was doing that book when technology was changing rapidly, and that was back in the day when someone would send you something and you couldn’t open it, and nothing was compatible.

Then, because the project took longer than expected, when you take a body of young writers most of their addresses are going to change. People are constantly moving. They don’t all leave forwarding addresses.

Then, some writers, when they hear from you that you want to use a particular poem, they want to select the poem for you. “No, don’t publish that poem. Use this one!”

Then, because the process took so long, by the time I’m ready to go to print, “Oh, I’ve changed that poem. Here’s a new version.” Or you have a person who changes their name, and all of a sudden now you have to abbreviate their middle initial, learn the capitalization, and these are the places where if you have a staff to make some of the editorial changes, that’s wonderful, but it’s a lot. When I get through Beyond the Frontier, I said “I will never do that again,” and it has to be a labor of love.

I would like more anthologies like Beyond the Frontier that aren’t purchased for commercial reasons but that are historical documents, so you’d have these big anthologies that would say, here are the people who are reading in the DC and Maryland area from 2000 to 2010. You could go to the library and check the shelves, and find those documents, but I would only take on that if you have a staff or a person who is running a project or a group of five or six people working on it.

EZR: Sounds like the right way to do it. You’ve also put together a very successful series of poetry readings. Is that something you might do again?

EEM: Well I used to do that. At one time I ran the Ascension series. I started that in 1974 and I started that primarily for African American writers living in DC. Many of us at that time—I was 24 at that time—we wanted to be published. We wanted to be given a job as a promotion or as running companies in the area and so we were frustrated, and I stumbled on the fact that in between the book and the audience was a poetry reading. You might not have a book but by doing a certain number of readings you could develop a market for a book.

Think about the last time that you went into a bookstore, went directly to the poetry section and purchased a book of poetry by somebody you’ve never heard of. When you go in there, you know what you’ve heard. If there’s a new writer who’s been reading around the city, you say, “Oh, this is so-and-so’s book. I wonder if that poem that I like is in here.” That’s how that works.

If I went back to the publishing business, and I was selecting manuscripts, I would definitely take writers who were active. You know, if you, Eli, were not active in the area, if you’re just writing, living in Virginia, ‘no.’ You would have to take a lot of writing doing readings at different places and venues so that I know that you have an audience and I know that as soon as I put that book out there it’s gonna move. If not, I’m gonna have to do a hell of a job a job to sell that book. You need a publisher or a person, like, sitting at the next table who has great poems but nobody knows them.

The poetry reading, I felt, was key in terms of audience development. I felt the poetry reading was key in terms of helping a young person develop that courage and self-knowledge to step in front of an audience. If, for example, I invited you to read poetry next week, you know in responding to that invitation, that I would like to have you do a certain number of readings. If you’re going to do a reading, so that invitation is an opportunity to do some self-editing. You’ve got to look at your work and say, “okay, I like this. I don’t like this.” I’ll read this and see what response it’s gonna create,” but all of a sudden it’s not just a reading. You are in a process of looking at your work critically.

The other reason for doing a reading is the other spin off. You come, you read and people interact with you, you get to network, and all of a sudden you are establishing your audience. You are interacting. You meet more people at a reading than if you have a book published, sitting at a shelf on a library, so the other spin off of a reading is the network it becomes.

If you were a new writer, what your reading series was doing back in the seventies—it was immediately giving you a community. People came, heard your work, said “Oh, I have a similar poet who works with you,” and people began hanging out together. Once I saw that, I built on it.

I realized that while I was giving young writers their first readings. If you are looking around the literary scene of Washington, the reading scene was very segregated. Nowhere could you point and say “there’s a series of well-known African-American
writers reading in Washington, DC,” so I began with my own money and my own resources, bringing well known writers—Ismael Reed, Alice Walker, June Jordan—to DC.

That was their only invitation to DC. If you were reading some of these writers as an African American or white reader and never thinking you were going to see them, well, at that time they were not going to be invited by the Folger. They were not going to be invited by anybody. If I didn’t write the invitation, they weren’t going to come.

Then, from 1974-2000 through the kindness and invitations of people like Octave Stevenson at the King Library and Leni Spencer at the Folger, my series began to be incorporated into those series. So if I look back at some of my friends who’ve programmed poetry readings, many of them were good people who didn’t know who the Black writers were.

It’s not that they were racist or that they didn’t want Black people to read here. It’s just that they didn’t know who the Black writers were. So what happened when I established a relationship with them, is that I said, “I’ve got some good people who people might want to hear and” and they gave me a program for a whole generation of African American writers in this city to get their reading.

Today we take for granted that we’ll see a balanced calendar of events from the Folger, but that was not the case. I have gone into the Martin Luther King Library and asking Octave Stevenson, “Where are your Black Poets.” This was the Martin Luther King Library, and he said he didn’t know.

I stopped the program in 2000 because there wasn’t any need with the spoken-word movement, and all the cafes and places to read. Where before all the every emerging writer came through my series, there were so many venues now, I would just have another reading series, and if I was going to try to make it unique, I would have to cater to it where I would just do a cer-
tain number of programs a year with big name writers. Before, I was focusing on emerging writers because I was giving them an outlet, but the times have changed, and now there’s no sense in doing it.

Also, just dealing with artists and poets and musicians, after a while it can burn you out. Hosting is demanding. I reached a point where I felt that I needed to grow as a writer. Some of my friends didn’t even know I wrote, so I got out of promotion and focused on my own work.

EZR: What readings do you go to now?

EEM: I don’t go to that many readings. The other thing that’s happened is over the last decade now, I’ve moved. At one time I lived on sixteenth street, I lived on Rhode Island Avenue and I lived in Adams Morgan, but now I live up near Walter Reed Hospital. I live in a better neighborhood. I live in a residential area. For me, since I don’t drive, getting around is a decision. I don’t like coming out of a reading space like the Folger and now it’s ten and now I have a hour ride to get home. That means my entire evening is gone.

So if you see me at a reading, that’s a political statement. Either it’s somebody that I want to come hear, or it’s somebody that I love deeply. It’s one of those things. There’s probably a generation of writers I haven’t heard. I don’t come to spoken word programs because I’m not a spoken word artist, and I’m very strict about that. I’ll come to some poetry readings, but I’m not going to sit through an open mic where I’m getting a heavy blast of spoken word.

Every now and then I do hear somebody I like, but most of the time I find it very boring. I’m sitting here waiting for the new music. A lot of people sound like Saul Williams in Slam. It’s the same sound. Poetry is like jazz: we don’t want every-

body to sound the same way.

So I’ll come out and see somebody who’s talented and articu-
late and I might be moved by that, but then I’ll sit down and say, “what is this person saying,” and if I was reading the text, I wouldn’t publish it, and I am publishing a lot of poetry.

As one of the editors of Prose Lore, I’ve still got my finger on new literature because I feel like I have an outlet to receive somebody’s work—I can publish it, but at the same time I feel a lot of the energy is coming through spoken word. You have to adjust to that.

So for me to come out it has to be somebody that I really want to hear and sometimes I just don’t do that and so there’s a whole generation who know me without my knowing them. Every now and then a young person will venture into my office

and introduce themselves and give me a CD or a reading and I think I have a good ear and a good eye right now.

You give me work by a new writer and I can tell you where they’re going right now, like my friend Ann Yadav, who I met here in Washington, she’s a great writer. I haven’t seen anybody who, talent for talent, comes close to where she is. You know, and you just see. You can listen to fifty, sixty, maybe a hundred people, and then all of a sudden you say “this is the real thing” and then you hope that person gets the promo-
tion and the backing they need, because you know they have the talent. You know they have the moral integrity. They work hard, they have their feet on the ground and you can see it.

I feel very good with some of the poets—especially the Ethi-
opian writers I just met—you know, you read it and you hear it, and you know.

There’s so much out there because literature is essentially a part of the entertainment industry and economic revitalization has taken place in so many cities around the country. We’re sitting here at Busboys and Poets and in so many other com-

munities there are cafes and places where people are reading.

When you’ve got these settings, somebody’s going to come up and they’re going to want to play a guitar and sooner or later somebody’s going to want to read some poems.

That’s why in the last few years everybody was into the beat writers, and everybody was sitting in the cafes and writing.

There’s a beauty to seeing that passed off from one generation to the next. Now I could be in Cleveland, Ohio. I don’t have to go to Paris. I’ve got the whole thing happening. I’ve got the beauty.

You can see the talent. You can see the talent, but for me to come into a school system, I’ve got to meet a person in a week that’s going to have to be something that’s worth my time, and that’s not a sense of arrogance. That’s just the way that I approach good writing, I mean, I didn’t like the last one at Arena Stage, I can’t say that, I mean, I didn’t like the last one at Arena Stage, Gem of the Ocean. I didn’t think it was directed well. Even there, I go to arena stage to see Gem of the Ocean, I hated it. I hate the producer. I love August Wilson’s work, but I hate the production. I leave the theatre angry, and there’s nothing wrong with that, because then what am I saying? I go back and my love for August Wilson’s work is even stronger now because I don’t want to see it messed up. So even though that play was bad, I learned something I could use as a reference.

It’s not like, “Where was I last week?” I know exactly where I was. I was sitting through this bad production, but I like that work, and I think that work, that’s work that needs doing. I’m just do-

ing some work with NEA and I was reading Carson McCullers’ novel The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter. I couldn’t put the book down. The characters were fantastic, so I was happy about that.

Then in terms of artists, last year I was extremely moved by Forest Whitacre’s acting in the Last King of Scotland. As soon as I came out of the theatre I said “Give this guy an Oscar.” I said, “Why wait” I looked at that: when I see Forest Whitacre, could I go see Eddie Murphy or Martin Lawrence? I can’t. This is my standard.

So getting back to the spoken word, if you’re not going to give me your Forest Whitacre don’t give me your CD. Don’t hand me that, if it’s not on that level in the way of, say, Suheir Ham-
mad, another poet I’m very high on. I always tell Suheir that when I think of a political writer, she is at the top of the list. Of course she’s Palestinian, so she has something she needs to write about, but she sets a tone for all of us who are dealing with whatever politics we’re dealing with because there’s a continuity between a June Jordan and a Suheir Hammad.

I can make that connection, but what other connections do we need? We need to ask ourselves, ”who comes after Adrienne Rich?” Who comes after Langston Hughes?” We need to always ask ourselves if we see a dropoff like we see no great jazz gigan-
ers— I’m not talking Wynton Marsalis, I’m talking about some-
one moving jazz forward. Now I can measure politically, there has been a worldwide dropoff in the quality of leadership. A couple weeks ago, in a conversation between Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro, Fidel says, “I’m okay, I’m studying.” I said, “Fidel’s studying! Of course he is! He’s a leader. That’s what leaders do, they study!” Now, let’s bring this home. Our own mayor has got three blackberries, but he’s got nothing in his cabinet or on his desk at his office. This is the nation’s capital. Aren’t you reading a serious book on architecture? Aren’t you reading a book or anything else. Is it worth my time?

Why wait? When I think of a political writer, she is at the top of the list. Of course she’s Palestinian, so she has something she needs to write about, but she sets a tone for all of us who are dealing with whatever politics we’re dealing with because there’s a continuity between a June Jordan and a Suheir Hammad.

That’s why when someone asks Bush what he’s reading, he says, “Well, I’m reading one Shakespeare, and you know, I got some fries,” or something. We live with Bush, but what is Mugabe reading around the world, not what we’re reading, but what are they reading, and what happens? The level of our political leadership is going down.

You see American Idol! The Jennifer Hudson type voices! That’s how it went down. The voices have gone down. I was just reviewing for my own little self, this last CD Wynton Marsalis did, and I just gave it away.

Wynton’s talking about this new jazz vocation he just discov-
ered who’s twenty or twenty two years old, who’s on there. I was reading about it and I said well let me come on and hear it and
Abbe Lowell Defends an Antic Head of State
by Eli Resnick

On the Ides of March, murder was the case at the Kennedy Center, where Justice Anthony Kennedy staged a sanity hearing for the title character from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Kennedy (the Justice, not the Center) played the role of a Danish judge in the forgivably misnamed The Supreme Court Hears The Trial of Hamlet. Giving form to this unscripted show was set down a brief prologue “of some dozen or sixteen lines,” explaining that Hamlet wakes up after being cut with a poisoned sword at the end of Shakespeare’s text, and is formally charged with the murder of Polonius. Part legal/theatrical entertainment and part intellectual improv-comedy, this particular performance was entirely stolen by Abbe D. Lowell, the superstar attorney who led the defense team and built a brick wall case for Hamlet’s insanity.

In a debate that has kept literary critics employed and indecisive for centuries, Lowell and his co-counsel, Catherine Crier brought down the full weight of modern rational thought and social science. In their opening and closing statements, and their questioning of two of the nation’s leading psychiatrists, the defense team proved beyond reasonable doubt that Hamlet exhibits every possible recognized symptom “schizoaffective disorder: bipolar type.” Since a psychiatric diagnosis only requires a fraction of those symptoms, and a competency hearing only requires a juror find “clear and convincing evidence,” and not reasonable doubt, they were doing alright.

While the prosecution cited philosophers and historical figures who have enjoyed Hamlet, Lowell, an English major at Columbia, stuck with a New Critical approach, analyzing examples from the text and showing how they fit the definition of the disease in question. When the prosecution begged the jury to suspend disbelief in ghosts, the defense showed, in the text, that nobody else hears the ghost, no one else can see it in daylight, and that Hamlet is sworn to kill his uncle based upon the word of this apparition. This, according to both psychologists, is a “command hallucination,” a psychotic symptom which, depending upon severity, often merits hospitalization. As Lowell puts it, “he’s acting on something no one else can hear. He’s crazy. He’s like someone who claims he’s the servant of God.”

One might expect that an attorney who has defended both Jack Abramoff and William Jefferson Clinton in the fights of their lives would place more stock in argument than in belief. When that attorney graciously spoke with me at the palatial Georgetown office of Chadbourne and Park, I was amazed by the personal conviction with which, even after the trial, he believed in Hamlet’s madness. “Shakespeare knew that there were mental illnesses that could deprive some-one of his reason. He may not have had that word for it, but people in his day were aware that it could happen to someone, and that is very clearly what he is describing in this play,” he told me.

But of course years of scholarship, time on the board of the Shakespeare Theatre and watching twenty different versions of the Bard’s masterpiece have not left Lowell looking for easy answers. “I see something new every time,” he explains. “The prosecution have some good points...no one is crazy all the time. Even a crazy person has moments of lucidity, but the character still shows all the elements of psychosis.”

In the end, like in most American jury trials, prejudice won out. The prosecution’s pleas to think like good Danes who believe in ghosts were too powerful for the volunteer jurors. The prosecution’s claim that Hamlet’s suicidal autolocation was quoted as a beacon of clear and rational thought in the debates between Abraham Lincoln and Frederick (sic) Douglas hit too strong of a chord on the heart strings of the high school and college students and theatre patrons called upon to hear this timeless case. There are also deep stereotypes about what Hamlet should be about.

In Shakespeare’s day, there was no audience for original scripts, so the best authors were those who did the best job of remaking the best stories. The story of Hamlet was already hundreds of years old by the time Shakespeare got to it and everybody knew that it’s the story of a Danish prince who pretends to be crazy so that he can live long enough to avenge his father’s death. What makes Shakespeare’s telling of the tale immortal is that Shakespeare’s Hamlet actually does, as Lowell showed the court, go crazy. This leads to a series of hilarious misunderstandings in the middle of a grisly tragedy as Hamlet’s closest friends and intended victims alike try to figure out whether he is crazy or, like in the old story, just faking in order to stay alive long enough to avenge his father’s death. Even Hamlet himself, every time he is alone, wonders aloud whether he is in control of his own actions. This is not sane behavior, but it is as rich of an element of satire as one can add to a play while still keeping the original vehicle intact.

Even though Shakespeare’s Hamlet is the only one that is widely read in America, the synopsis of the old story is still the most frequent explanation of the action, and no jury in our land could accept a verdict that Hamlet was not competent to stand trial by reason of insanity. Lowell imagines that the same set of preconceptions must have governed the minds of Elizabethan audiences, and says that “Shakespeare would have been happy with a 6–6 verdict,” which is what the defense won by proving to six out of twelve volunteer jurors that the synopsis they had believed was Hamlet was not actually the Hamlet that actors and poets spend their lives adoring.

To the man who publicly explained that Ken Starr’s case against Clinton was a partisan witch hunt from the beginning, but still saw his client impeached by a Republican majority in the House of Representatives, there is nothing new in accepting the terrain on which you must fight and still taking pride in a job well done. But part of that pride comes from identifying the terrain and using every possible advantage it contains. As I get up to leave Lowell’s office, he stops me by a shelf where he’s got as many works of literature as law, including an illeg-ibly worn complete Shakespeare he read in college. He picks up a green paperback to show me, “we agreed to use the Arden edition of Hamlet. If we had used a different edition, some of the lines I needed wouldn’t have been there.”
The only downside of the rise of creative writing programs in universities is that much of modern fiction finds its setting in the realm of academia, where rolling quads give way to departmental politics, scandal, tender first romances and, all too often, cliché. Not so in The Zookeeper. In this lively debut, American University alumnus Alex MacLennan brings his readers onto refreshing literary terrain, a zoo. On display are a panoply of well-wrought, achingly flawed characters, who wind their way through a delicately intertwined narrative of love and limitation.

At the heart of the story is Sam, the titular zookeeper. Sam works at the National Zoo, here in DC. It’s a good gig, but tending animal cages becomes part of a life that places him in a metaphorical cage of his own. He’s fallen into a deep, deep rut. His proposals to improve the displays of his beloved black howler monkeys are rejected with depressing consistency and his love life is little more than a retreating memory. Christmas decorations in his apartment, long out of season, display his internal disconnection. When Sam stands before a primate enclosure and declares that he is not, “alone, alone,” but “good alone,” even the monkeys are dubious.

Change comes in the form of Dean, a charming but guileful TV weatherman, who instantly sweeps Sam off his feet and into a life of glamour and status ascension, with all its attendant joys and excitements, but also its pitfalls. Thematically loaded, this novel does not allow such an easy escape from confinement. All the people Sam cares about turn out to be as captive as the animals he cares for. Even Dean, who seems to overflow with confidence and swagger, isn’t exempt. MacLennan explains, “He’s in the cage of expectations of what other people expect him to be, what success means and how to be happy in the world.” He’s the most trapped, because he can’t even see that he’s in a cage.

The artfully conceived narrative simmers with emotional depth, and the novel benefits from a strikingly developed ensemble cast. As Sam navigates his burgeoning relationship, we also closely follow several of his friends and relatives, from the doddering big cat specialist, Jack, to Sam’s ambitious sister and her academically faltering son.

“There’s a section from the point of view of his sister, two from his mom and one from his father. In the initial versions, I wrote sections like that for a lot of the other characters,” says MacLennan. “Every character was going to have their own little mini-short story that dealt with the metaphor of cages.”

Though the focus is definitively on Sam, the author’s hard work getting to know his supporting cast through these early exercises shines through in his finished product. All of the book’s characters evoke strong sympathy, even when they’re frustratingly unaware of themselves or, on occasion, cruel. In the end, we’re inclined to see them in the same light we see Sam; imperfect and, in their own ways, victims of the habits of their lives.

The Zookeeper is also remarkable for its vivid sense of place. From the very beginning, DC readers will find themselves on familiar turf. Much of the story’s action taking place right in the city—from the Zoo, down Connecticut to Sam’s apartment and out to a number of familiar haunts around Northwest. In all the vivid descriptions, the sights and sounds ring true.

On The Zookeeper’s strong tie to DC, MacLennan explains, “The only thing that I think is harder about being a ‘DC writer’ is that it takes more work to connect into the DC writing community. It’s definitely there, but it’s not sort of an obvious plug-in, whereas I think in New York or San Francisco, it’s sort of in your face that we are a creative city. DC doesn’t sort of have that culture in a public way. It’s subterranean here.” When strong young writers claim this city as their own through their words and work, the sense of a writing community can only grow stronger. Someday, writers will cite Alex MacLennan to explain why DC has such an unavoidable literary presence.
BACK AGAIN

Thanks she wore it in a bun back then
It would fray over cinder steps
Or celery stalks like fringe I see
Mostly I visited as she’d lean down
And I’d poke up with my mouth open
At awe at age and to her smile
She gripped more with simple pans
Or teacher shoes to help me up a stool or pat me
Dusty ways she loved last stooped her door
While I grew out ago. [stanza break]

Then I won’t and did forget
Until a million streams
Until one just one so much with chestnut tag of hair
Turned up
But now a he
A hoe
So which is which and bluing eyes
Who is sitting still?

LOVE

Ships to be right up against them
Trees impossible
How to understand these giant things—
Ben Franklin in bolts
Too much money like a spotlight
Most importantly trying to understand this one—
The bigness of first times

Notice how such a larger scale
Shakes every kind of feeling—
Grandness
Especially the slower kind
And like the sound of fountains at night
Or even far off wars
It darlings us along
A hope at a time

For all that there is
For every single bit of it
All I ask is to let what I feel
Get the better of me.

Hiram Larew’s work has appeared in several poetry journals and books. His second collection is forthcoming from Vrzhu Press. He lives in Maryland.
black peppermint

come on little tramp
hook me up some
blackened will
suckle you look-rat
look-monkey
looky-look
haven’t you
figured it out yet
I am a killer
and I poison what I touch
I am a loser
and my friends
never win

post hole digger

we are what
ambition
has made us.
and there ain’t nothing wrong
with a repeat customer

the bulk of the blues
flogs the flame
into the lightness

southern time zone
simple mcsugar
leftover treasures of the season

turning around to see
what the sound of broken
glass was all about

retrieved another
discarded plaything

& there it is
one of my alternate
lives in the sunshine.
Fatslug Is Lost

In the great TV serial of life,
Fatslug is not the sweet, shy fat guy
everyone loves and slightly condescends to.
He is, rather, the guy on the beach
standing in the surf with the baby in his arms.
He doesn’t know when he picked up the baby.
He doesn’t know how he got to the beach.
He vaguely remembers hearing the baby cry
and thinking, somehow, it needed to be saved.
Fatslug wants to do something magnificent,
or, if not magnificent, at least good.
Trapped on the beautiful, terrifying island
where everything happens for indecipherable reasons,
he feels this is at least partly his fault.
He feels he isn’t doing enough,
has not done enough, will never do enough.
If he had only believed enough,
been pure enough, the plane would never have crashed.
He needs to make amends, to be worthy of love.
He holds out the baby, the token of his penance,
to all the people he doesn’t understand,
who don’t understand him, who chase him.
He almost thinks he has made his point
before the horrified mother slaps him
and the true heroes beat him up.
Even the nice fat guy hates him now.

Fatslug Tells a Story

Fatslug heard a story today he thought
was funny, and at dinner tonight
a friend said something that reminded him of it,
and so he told it, and after he told it,
everyone at the table stared at him
in puzzled silence. Someone especially close
to Fatslug demanded to know why he told it.
Fatslug was dumbfounded at having to explain
himself. He thought the connection
between the story and the conversation
was as plain as that between baseball and bat,
between water and tap, between a hummingbird’s
susurrant wing and the air.

But as he saw the once-friendly faces
congealing like the food on their now-ignored plates,
Fatslug perceived a shut-out game,
a permanent drought for the cobwebbed faucets.
Any connection between himself
and anyone or anything remotely human
vanished in the fast and heartless blur
of a hummingbird’s wing. And that’s the story.
I was jotting down some notes at a coffee shop in downtown Silver Spring, when I received a text message from John Hanshaw, saying he was five minutes away. Of course, in this business, you always double anyone’s estimate; so I felt I had some time to continue those little musings on one of my favorite underground filmmakers.

John Hanshaw has touched almost everyone influential in the D.C. film community. His Guerrilla Film Festival, now in its seventh year, is an undeniable success. The Guerrilla Film Club holds semi-monthly networking events for film professionals and film lovers. And his tireless campaigns, for the independent films he so loves, continue to have an impact on the D.C. scene.

Ten minutes later, John burst into the coffee shop with all the fervor you would see watching him at an event. He offers to buy me a drink, I accept, and he’s off again – no doubt glad-handing with the barista. But that’s John: an unassuming guy, cordial, funny, and candid. Sit with him for five minutes, and you understand why everyone loves him. It’s hard to believe this regular Joe, with such humble ambitions, is one of the most instrumental figures in the D.C. independent film scene.

RUSSELL:
In thirty words or less, what is the mission of the Guerrilla Film Festival?
JOHN:
To screen films that are independent or foreign, and therefore not receiving the full attention they may deserve.

RUSSELL:
That was definitely less than thirty words. Why do you do the Guerrilla film festival?
JOHN:
Well, the festival basically started as a way to screen films from a local contest called, “The 48 hour film project.” A bunch of friends and I had teams for that contest, and I decided it would be fun to screen the films from that contest.

RUSSELL:
Is that where the name came from?
JOHN:
That was the origin of the idea. I thought it was a cool name. I wanted to show stuff that was from guerrilla film makers. People doing stuff that was a little alternative, a little bit challenging, a little bit outside the Hollywood paradigm.

RUSSELL:
But you show Oscar winning films...
JOHN:
The thing about the Oscar winners that I screen, is that they’re short films, so they’re not Hollywood productions. They are just recognized by the academy as being fine production. But they can be very experimental, fairly low budget, and fairly alternative because they’re in the shorts category.

RUSSELL:
How do you pick films?
JOHN:
I have a screening committee. I used to pick films by myself but I found I can’t trust my own judgment anymore.

RUSSELL:
Do you get a lot of local stuff?
JOHN:
You know, I don’t. Because I don’t have an open call for entries. Basically, what I do is cruise around the web. I look at who won which festival. I look at who’s in the festival for x-y-z, and I’ll just approach the director and say, ‘I heard you won this festival, it sounds interesting, send it to me.’

RUSSELL:
Do you ever plan on expanding it to an open call?
JOHN:
I might do that, if I had a bigger staff. I know a lot of festivals, even smaller ones, they’ll get 7000 films and if you have a call for entries, you have a responsibility to look at everything. That’s a big time commitment, so I’m not quite there yet.
I know a lot of people who spent years in New York or L.A., and they're coming back to D.C.

RUSSELL:
I think I know the answer to this one, but just to clarify: which came first, the film club, or the film festival?

JOHN:
The film festival came first. I was trying to do that every six months, but it became too much. So, I created the film club as a way for people to get together more often than once a year, or once every six months, and appreciate independent film.

RUSSELL:
So the film club came from the film festival. Was there a big demand for it?

JOHN:
People kept saying 'when is the next film festival?' and I'd say, 'maybe six months, maybe a year.' [They'd say:] 'a year, I can't wait a year!' So that's why I created the film club. And I think there's a lot of demand for it. 150 people are showing up for each one now.

RUSSELL:
I've definitely seen it expand. It used to be every couple of months, but now it seems to be happening monthly or bimonthly.

JOHN:
I try. I'm trying to make it something to sustain the festival.

RUSSELL:
What can we expect from this year's festival?

JOHN:
This year some stuff I'm going to show is going to be more aggressive, politically. To date, I've shown a lot of films that are interesting stories, but they're not necessarily in-your-face political. And I think you're going to see a bit more of that.

RUSSELL:
Do you have the program set already?

JOHN:
No. I'm still pulling it together. It's guerrilla, organizationally, as well. There's going to be a flurry of activity soon.

RUSSELL:
What is it about the process that gets you excited enough to keep doing this?

JOHN:
I think after the last festival, I got probably 20 e-mails from people saying that, "it was a fantastic event. I love what you're doing. D.C. needs more of it. I'm glad that you're making the effort." And for me, that is a big charge.

RUSSELL:
You are one of the people to know in this city. You're on the ground. What do you think of D.C. Film?

JOHN:
I think it's moving in some interesting directions. Because, I know a lot of people who spent years in New York or L.A., and they're coming back to D.C.— for personal reasons or otherwise —and they still want to do production stuff, but they want to do it in D.C. So, you're finding line producers and directors who've shot feature films that have gotten distribution nationally, who are now here and they're interested in new projects. So, that's really interesting to me. In the past, people, everyone, would just head off to New York or L.A., and we'd never see them again.

RUSSELL:
You're speaking of established people, what about new independent filmmakers?

JOHN:
I think it's a good thing I'm seeing, because these people have experience, and D.C. being the kind of place it is, they're willing to share their experience and knowledge. It's not as competitive as New York or L.A. So, I know these people with these great experiences, and they're willing to talk to anyone about their projects, or give feedback on scripts. So, if you have a great idea, these guys are at least willing to give you some feedback.

RUSSELL:
Why do we film?

JOHN:
Well, I think it's the same reason people paint or they write; they want to create something. They have a story to tell, and they want to tell it to other people. And, if they have that energy and that drive, and the right kind of equipment, and technical support, it's one of the greatest creative outlets you can find.

The Guerrilla Film Festival runs on June 1 and 2.
Visit: http://www.gfilmfest.com/

Russell Nohelty is the executive producer of 100Dimension Television. He has worked in production for five years and has excellent relationships with the D.C. film community.
Death. Ah yes, death, that universal inevitability that plagues us all, every last one of us, even if we don’t realize it. I confess, it’s tempting to pull a Jerry Seinfeld on the subject—a “What’s the deal with all this talk about death?” and string it out in that high, nasally, oh-so aggravating pitch we all know and love. Because really, what’s all the fuss about? Why the constant attention? Going to the bathroom is inevitable too, but we don’t fret about that one any given moment (my apologies to any IBS-afflicted readers, not trying to exclude you by any means—please, have a seat, enjoy yourselves!).

But of course we all know the answer to that one. It’s our fear of the unknown, of what awaits us after we’re through with these blithering bodies with their health problems and their astigmatisms and their paper cuts and their itches in places we can’t quite reach. When you get down to it we’re all a bunch of sissies, all of us so scared of the Great Beyond that death is all we think about, even when we sit down to paint pretty little pictures or write sap-happy plays. Death has become a great hulking tumor of a predominate theme in much of what we call art. But we’re gonna keep writing about death anyway, whether or not it brings us any closer to peace or closure, whether it makes us sissies or not, we don’t care! Pens in hand, we’re all scribbling away on Big Black Death like we were Emily Dickinson. She couldn’t get enough of that death, which kind of makes you wonder.

We’re all a bunch of Emily Dickinsons

Life and Death as Orchestrated by Nethers

by Danny Fasold
One thing that's immediately recognizable in Nethers' music is their attraction to simple, acoustic-driven ditties loaded with rural imagery, visions of holy cotton fields and setting suns.

brev. The rest of the band (John Passmore and Aaron Carlson on guitars, Mike Scutari on drums) sat back and remained relatively silent, tossing in a few side comments and jokes here and there, while West was upfront about her band's goth-like lyrical tendencies.

"Oh the Dred's is told through the point of view of a canary literally sent off to die," West continued. "And then 'Hung Herself in a Bird Cage' is about a woman trying to isolate herself from the plague, she's surrounded by all this horrible death so she just stays in her room and stares at the walls, not talking to anybody and eventually going crazy. A lot of the songs on the album address death and isolation, so I'd be lying if I said that it wasn't a major theme."

Talking to West, you'd never guess that she's the kind of gal who sits down and writes about dying canaries and Black Plagues. On theme. "death and isolation, so I'd be lying if I said that it wasn't a major thing."

"'Mir III' deals with the idea of propagation of life throughout the universe," she said. "It's about asteroids smashing into each other and starting whole new planets. That song is actually the exact opposite of death—it's about the creation of life. I guess you could say the album's theme is about life just as much as death.

"It's easy for some people to make the distinction that we're Americana," West said. "People will grab onto the whole acoustic guitar thing and throw you in a hole with it. But we don't have mandolins or fiddles or anything."

"Though we did use banjo on 'Daybreak,'" Passmore laughed. "'Still, I'd like to think we've a little bit weirder than most Americana."

"We all really enjoy Appalachian music and their themes on things like dead wires, coal mines, being broke, getting drunk and getting hooked on drugs," West said. "And we'll use those themes ourselves at times. But we're more straight indie rock than anything."

Shortly after we finished our drinks, Nethers started their set. They kicked things off with an instrumental noise session, a kind of guitar-heavy jam-band meander (but more in the vein of a Sonic Youth jam, not your typical Phish-y jam bands) before morphing their trashy caboodle into "It's an Island," easily the grungiest song on their album even though Nethers' entire set was far grungier, far more improvised than their album ever dared to be.

The record itself has a far more simplistic, sing-sing folk/pop feel—nothing as loud as your ears want it, never muddling, never stifling West's vocals. True to their word, they are straight indie rock—you just won't quite know it until you see them on stage.

Still, when all is said and done, for every primal outburst of energy they pour into their live shows and for every album's final song about happy sunshine and smiling friends, Nethers is a dark, deathly band. And a lot of bands have made dark, deathly music, so what makes them any different? What's their answer to the dilemma?

"We all really enjoy Appalachian music and their themes on the universe," Passmore laughed. "Though we did use banjo on 'Daybreak,'" Passmore laughed. "'Still, I'd like to think we've a little bit weirder than most Americana."

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"'Mir III' is about a woman trying to isolate herself from the other and starting whole new planets. That song is actually the exact opposite of death—it's about the creation of life. I guess you could say the album's theme is about life just as much as death.

"The title of the album itself alludes to it (In Fields We Lie) that's an obvious allusion to being buried after you die, but it's also about just lying out in the grass and enjoying the sunshine. It's a double entendre."

"Mirror II, " West said, becoming more and more animated as she tried to hit upon a lighter note of her band's music. "I fought and fought to put that song last on the album. You know how a lot of songs on the end of albums are just really, really intense and emotional and leave you exhausted just from listening. We didn't want to do anything like that. The whole record leading up to that song was already very ethereal and dark.

"'It was a way of saying not art not is lost,'" guitarist John Passmore chimed in.

One thing that's immediately recognizable in Nethers' music is their attraction to simple, acoustic-driven ditties loaded with rural imagery, visions of holy cotton fields and setting suns. "Do Re Mi" was positively made for a night by the campfire under the shelter of tree branches and pine. With so many Americana tendencies, one might think that Nethers is actually an Americana band. After all, they pulled their name from Nethers, Virginia, a tiny, village that lies inexcusably amidst the Shenandoah Mountains where they stayed for two weeks in a drunken, wintry slumber only to emerge with In Fields We Lie recorded and fully mastered.

Still, when all is said and done, for every primal outburst of energy they pour into their live shows and for every album's final song about happy sunshine and smiling friends, Nethers is a dark, deathly band. And a lot of bands have made dark, deathly music, so what makes them any different? What's their answer to the dilemma? Or is there one? Is all this ghastly fixation on the afterlife and disease and horrible isolation really worth it? Or does it only sink our heads deeper into the muck, the rest of the world careening on by like a blur of nighttime traffic, everyone out there dancin' and jivin' to every mindless, senseless party that's ever been, and who's really the jerk, huh?"

I left the Nethers show that night with these questions unanswered, and when I emailed West and other members of the band, they didn't reply. Who knows what Nethers has up their collective sleeves? Maybe they're just coasting, just making good tunes, just writing what they feel. Or maybe they're just waiting for the next album.

The guitar riffs heard on the latest Dawn of Man EP, “In the Bronze Age,” can be mostly summed up as not just ethereal but a perfect backing to the pouncing whispers of lead singer Allison Russell’s voice. While Russell lacks the ferocity in mimicking the girls of indie sensation Le Tigre, she brings a similar sense of urgency and sass. In the first track, “A-Z,” Russell uses this power to encourage the audience to use “all you got” because there is “freedom from rules/freedom from constraint” when there is “freedom to create anything we make.” Dawn of Man is clearly making a declaration here: they are not going to be another band overshadowed by a fleeting movement and they won’t be deemed outdated because some trend has passed. This also is a proclamation that critics who recently dubbed Dawn of Man’s “scenesters” — in a somewhat scathing review — seemed to have overlooked.

Dawn of Man’s subtle, but not delicate hints of punk philosophy are found in the title track “In the Bronze Age” with lyrics like, “I do what I want/be cause I’ve got no rules/I’ve got no laws” because, after all, Dawn of Man is “making things beautiful.” Through Andrea Zura’s systematic and thundering bass line accompanied by Quindlen’s hard-line and heavy-paced tempo possesses just as much assured enthusiasm as Clancy’s guitar. This is a quality of Quindlen’s that has been compared to the likes of New Order. And, even though there are influences of early nineties modern rock bands such as Jesus Lizard, a new era of atmospheric rock is present in every chord on every track laid down on this four song EP. Innovational sound is something producer David Sitek undoubtedly influenced. Not only is Sitek a long time friend of Clancy’s and band mate from the days in Blind Ambition, but he also is a part of the “dance-punk” group T.V. on the radio. The final song on the EP seems to encompass what this band means to each of its members. Or, at least, that’s what Russell’s persuasive, direct and absolute tone would make the listener want to believe. “Taking Shape” talks about the shift into a whole other person or entity, even. There are allusions to a lone “creature of the night” that goes “from black to white/losing track of time,” and then breaks into the chorus: “Transformation in progress Transformation complete Transformation in progress White hot burning heat” In between choruses, Clancy throws in the essential punk rock guitar slide to highlight the shift from their airy guitars to another reality; Brian Clancy wants to remind his listeners that D.C.’s musical past still exists. Even though there is a transformation, or shift of qualities, he will always be there to remind us that whatever changed once existed. “Taking Shape” reassures the listener of how relevant its lyrics are to the renovation that the D.C. music scene is facing at this very moment.

Download tracks or purchase the 4 song EP—Record label: Post Fact Records (www.postfact.com) Get a free sample of Dawn of Man’s offerings—Myspace Page: www.myspace.com/dawnofman
Bloc Party
A Weekend In The City
(WICHITA)

Bloc Party is back with A Weekend In The City, giving us more of the electric indie-pop mood music that won the hearts of fans and fellow musicians alike on Silent Alarm. Kele Okereke charms once again with uncomplicated, lyrical storytelling, and the band provides an ample mix of rocking, guitar hummers and lovelorn, keyboard-laden pop.

While Okereke continues with the straightforward and, at times, unabashedly sappy lyrics found on Silent Alarm, this time it seems he has a bit more to say. He's obviously trying to get a lot out all at once over the Weekend, and the album's constantly changing feel and tempo are a result.

Weekend opens with a bang as Okereke takes aim at the me-first materialism of the consumer, and the album's constantly changing feel and tempo are a result. The mood and tempo of the album shift

Bible
Neon Bible
(MERGE)

The Arcade Fire follow up 2005's self-produced, indie-world-renowned Funeral, with the equally sappy Neon Bible. The Fire picks up where it left off with a solid album that is at various times rousing, gloomy, and foot-stomping. Bible, several tracks from which were recorded live, features front man Win Butler's trademark ominous lyrics, over a sound larger than that of Funerals — created largely by swirling guitars, piano, and strings and orchestral arrangements, and one brooding pipe organ. Nevertheless, Bible's larger sound can't overshadow the intricacy of Butler's haunting lyrics, or the astonishing musical ability of his supporting cast.

Bible opens with Black Mirror, in which tension builds as Butler looks into the future and says mirror and clearly does not like what he sees (“Mirror, Mirror on the wall/show me where them bombs will fall”). The album seamlessly glides on the surface of a hardy gurdy into the evocative Keep the Car Running, which highlights Butler's acute awareness that time is running out, and a resulting desire to escape from the mundane and overbearing everyday. (“Men are coming to take me away/I don't know why, but I know I can't stay”; “There's a weight that's pressing down/late at night you can hear the sound”). Butcher's wife and band-mate, Haitian-born Regine Chassagne, finds time to shine amidst the doom and despair. Chassagne, who provided vocals on a few Funerals tracks, makes her own on Bible. Her vocals on the first half of Black Wave/Bad Vibrations are stirring and add an interesting contrast to Butler. On this track, and in a backup role on The Well and The Lighthouse and No Cars Go, Chassagne taps into her impressive range, which fans were given only a taste of on the previous album. While Bible is overtly religious at points, it looks like he ultimately finds his elusive refuge, “between the click of the light and the start of the dream.”

Overall, Butler & Co. certainly do not disappoint with their sophomore effort. Despite a dark outlook at times, the band continues to find different and interesting ways to comment on their world as they see it.

Neon Bible hits stores in the U.S. on March 6, 2007. The Fire spreads to D.C. on May 4 at DAR Constitution Hall.

—Chris Opfer

Albert Hammond Jr.
Yours To Keep
(ROUGH TRADE) RTRADCD338

The Strokes’ rhythm guitarist takes center stage with Yours To Keep, proving that he’s not just another who can write hip, catchy tunes. The album, which was released in the UK in late 2006, is a compilation of songs Hammond wrote over the course of the last few years, some of which he unsuccessfully pitched to his bandmates as tracks for 2006’s First Impressions of Earth. Yet while certain cuts may have that “Strokes-y” sound, Hammond makes his own mark on this album, which showcases his wispy voice and equally nimble arrangements.

Yours opens with the dreamy Cartoon Music for Superheroes, a harmonic piece in which Hammond gives us his best Brian Wilson impression. In Transit, clearly the track most similar to the material Hammond has helped create in his full-time gig, follows. Its absence on First Impressions was clearly Hammond’s bandmates’ loss. What continues are charmingly straightforward songs (“You can’t trust what I say to you / I know they’re all lies / Do you?" “I think that if we were all we had / That’s more than most people ever have, anyway”) And then there are the standard themes: love (Scarred), lust (Call An Ambulance), growing up (Hard To Live In The City), moving on (Blue Skies). Standouts include Bright Young Thing, an ode to overbearing women, the “head bob” inducing 101, and Scarred. But it is the open, uncomplicated nature of the songs that is particularly enduring about this album. Hammond comes right at you — stripped down, but in his own way. A way that is neither overbearing nor pretentious. It feels as if you are sitting in Albert’s living room, amongst a group of friends, just listening to him play. Yours To Keep hits U.S. Stores on March 6.

—Chris Opfer

The Strokes’ rhythm guitarist takes center stage with Yours To Keep, proving that he’s not just another who can write hip, catchy tunes. The album, which was released in the UK in late 2006, is a compilation of songs Hammond wrote over the course of the last few years, some of which he unsuccessfully pitched to his bandmates as tracks for 2006’s First Impressions of Earth. Yet while certain cuts may have that “Strokes-y” sound, Hammond makes his own mark on this album, which showcases his wispy voice and equally nimble arrangements.

Yours opens with the dreamy Cartoon Music for Superheroes, a harmonic piece in which Hammond gives us his best Brian Wilson impression. In Transit, clearly the track most similar to the material Hammond has helped create in his full-time gig, follows. Its absence on First Impressions was clearly Hammond’s bandmates’ loss. What continues are charmingly straightforward songs (“You can’t trust what I say to you / I know they’re all lies / Do you?" “I think that if we were all we had / That’s more than most people ever have, anyway”) And then there are the standard themes: love (Scarred), lust (Call An Ambulance), growing up (Hard To Live In The City), moving on (Blue Skies). Standouts include Bright Young Thing, an ode to overbearing women, the “head bob” inducing 101, and Scarred. But it is the open, uncomplicated nature of the songs that is particularly enduring about this album. Hammond comes right at you — stripped down, but in his own way. A way that is neither overbearing nor pretentious. It feels as if you are sitting in Albert’s living room, amongst a group of friends, just listening to him play. Yours To Keep hits U.S. Stores on March 6.

—Chris Opfer
Boxed away between Sixteenth and Seventeenth Streets, and Swann and S Streets, NW, the Pass Gallery (Painting and Sculpture Studio) is one of D.C.’s most secluded non-profit exhibition spaces. Housed in an old, brick carriage house, the downstairs space is large and open. A spiral iron staircase takes one to the more intimate upstairs space, where a set of French Doors flood the room with northern light.

Opened in 1996, artist Richard Siegman, at 1617 S Street, NW, the Pass Gallery has brought a schedule of quality contemporary art to midtown D.C. for the past eleven years. Established to showcase D.C. artists working in the abstract, minimal, pop and conceptual art genres, the gallery has also embraced other media, such as photography and film. Siegman has sought out and brought to the gallery a steady flow of local painters, sculptors, photographers, and other artists—giving many their first opportunity to show. His unflagging support of local artists has been a great benefit to the D.C. arts community, and the community at large and urbancode salutes those efforts—Claude Seymour

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Photos: Claude Seymour
In New Orleans there is a very old bar at the far end of Bourbon Street where few tourists wander even today. Despite the sign above its dilapidated entrance announcing its age as "the oldest" in the city, and the name it bears, which carries with it all the romance of piracy, it is a place that by mid-afternoon is nearly deserted. Perhaps it is too far a walk from the run of the mill tourist joints a few blocks west; perhaps its attraction is of a sort to measure out those that will and those that won't accept its dark dank embrace. But once inside, whether at the bar or a rickety table, I have rarely wished to leave. For me at least, it is enough to know that here, a century and a half ago, black gold was traded for pleasure and property. Nor need I close my eyes to resume the fictions that so captivated my youth. From the cypress and the mottled plaster, comes an aroma of such decrepitude that I cannot but drink at will. Make no mistake: this is a place to die in, slowly, by increments, month after month after month.

Then, long ago then, in that time between the turn of the 19th century and its apocalyptic civil war, Lafitte's was no memoriam to a bygone culture of theft and freedom. In fact, it wasn't so much of a bar at all despite the few barrels and chairs scattered about and the rack of ready bottles. Where a dusty piano now stands in a shallow alcove was a wall, and beyond the wall a blacksmith's shop. Horse-shoes, spurs, rapiers and flintlocks passed through the fire and hammer there. A fair and frequent trade kept the shop busy enough. Smelting gold and silver into ingots and bars cleansed of all crest or trademark was its specialty though -- that and the trustworthy silence of its owner, a former bosun with the master, Lafitte.

For it was here that Lafitte sent his newly acquired goblets, necklaces, tiaras, ear rings, bracelets, trays, mirror frames, cutlery, icons, coins and all else that glittered true. A "friend" would arrive, his carpetbag heavy but not conspicuous, which he would hand to the smithy. Necessary items would be bought, the sales slip containing an extra line, a date and time at which to return. The "friend" would leave with another carpetbag of about the same size and make. Usually, with the transaction complete, he would turn the corner and slip inside for a quick toast with other comrades old and new, or those soon to become competitors.

Lafitte was the one person, even when he had gained the city's honor for bravery in 1814, and drew to him the reverence of the oldest families, never to appear there. He was known to say that, once within its doors, faced with the smoky plume of sparks that danced up from the smithy's blows, he would never be able to leave. Rather than spend his new wealth on his ships, friends, whores, cards, clothes or horses, he would judge his worth by the myth of its transformation from another's property to his.

And perhaps that is why Lafitte outlasted most of his contemporaries. His largesse availed him of the kind of legal and political sympathies quite necessary to sustain his enterprise. His bribes were "gifts," given and taken without secrecy or malice. Then as now, money bought compassion. In fact, he appeared just as he would wish, and which enabled him to do what he wished. That his exquisite sense of manners held the balance to his ruthless attacks was the event that his name gave truth to. And in those days that was a rarity.

Cunning to a fault, he was also cautious enough to make his court at the plantation of a friend, a widower, days west from New Orleans. Lost amidst plains and bayous, Chretian Pt. offered easy access by skiff and, if required, easy escape through a labyrinth of trails. He would live there, sometimes for several months, enjoying the beauty of the land and the bounty of the house to which his contributions added their luster. If he were not a pirate, or could have quit piracy when the chance was his, he probably would have settled nearby to manage his land by day and deal his cards by night in splendid obscurity.

History, of course, was not so kind to Lafitte. For as the country matured about him its laws demanded quicker satisfaction. And with a growing armed force to serve the law, it only became a matter of time. His moment had passed. Even New Orleans lost some of its reverence for him. Led by the dailies, which now accused him of all his past, Lafitte's was no longer the favorite meeting place of the lawless who lived by their own code.

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Disgusted by this betrayal of his position, angered even more by the several traps he evaded, each too close for comfort, he returned to Barataria, his former kingdom of tiny islets west from Pecan Island to Galveston Bay. From there he resumed his incursions on shipping with greater tenacity than ever before. Warned repeatedly to cease, even granted clemency again by the Governor General, he turned his back on any kind of forgiveness. And in those days that was a rarity.

A noble gesture? A desperate gesture? A futile gesture with a bit of both in the bargain? I only know that, when I sit at the bar next to a vanished blacksmith's shop and the stink of the old wood mixes with the icy scent of my drink, I am waiting, waiting for Lafitte's man with his carpet bag full of loot, or even Lafitte himself, finally come to this place where his wealth was born and his name survives, a calling card for the fantasist in each of us.