

Museums • Review

In the galleries: Whimsy rendered starkly, in black and white

By **Mark Jenkins**

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Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi, “*Turning Shadow*,” 2019, acrylic and watercolor on panel, 11 ¼” x 14”

Tolman grew up in Wheaton, Md., whose tract-home expanses he has depicted in earlier work. But most of his scenarios are urban, and combine sheer fancy with close observation of D.C. (He recently moved from Washington to Pittsburgh to convert a former school into shared studio space.) In the largest vignette here, people swarm a cityscape that includes a concert, a protest and a security checkpoint that shoppers must pass on their way to a market. The pieces of this puzzle are realistic, but some of them — such as a rock outcropping topped with trees both real and fake — are incongruous.

Although he occasionally employs small touches of color, the artist relies mostly on a profusion of thin black lines, dashes and dots. Sometimes he stipples part of a picture so tightly that the area appears to be textured paper, but the grain is all hand-drawn ink. Tolman is a master builder whose every mark is as solid as a brick or a plank.

The show also includes three splendidly smudgy charcoal drawings by David Nash that represent the British artist’s tree sculptures. The drawings, which the gallery has shown before, are as immediate as Tolman’s are elaborate.

Ben Tolman & David Nash Through June 15 at Gallery Neptune & Brown, 1530 14th St. NW.

Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi

The largest painting in Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi’s show at Hemphill Fine Arts is a flood of crimson with one detail a viewer could easily miss: a tiny golden gate, rendered in the style and with the precision of a vintage Persian illuminated manuscript. The gateway is one possible entrance to Ilchi’s “I Surrender to You, Ashen Lands and Blue Skies,” a selection of landscapes that are more spiritual than geographic.

Ilchi layers acrylic and watercolor to yield plumes of color, heavy on blue and red, that appear to billow and surge. In addition to including small representational details, the Tehran-born local artist contrasts her fluid hues

with map-like compositions, or she divides the pictures into squares reminiscent of decorative tiles. This show includes four watery paintings on Mylar and 10 small pictures whose imagery suggests satellite photos.

Several paintings locate oceanic expanses inside rectangles that are painted partway between the picture's center and edge. These interior boxes can be seen as photographic frames and as pages from an illustrated book. Such details link Ilchi's flowing near-abstractions to centuries-old tradition.

Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi: I Surrender to You, Ashen Lands and Blue Skies Through June 29 at Hemphill Fine Arts, 1515 14th St. NW

Stephanie J. Williams

The soft, stuffed, often pink objects dangling at the Greater Reston Arts Center evoke sausages and human organs, yet aren't entirely recognizable. They seem to be "Things That Don't Have Names," a title that Stephanie J. Williams borrowed from author Helen Oyeyemi's novel "White Is for Witching." Melding aspects of bodies, clothes and ritual objects, the D.C. artist's site-specific installation is assembled from parts that are imprecise yet vivid.

The show includes an array of trophy-like plaques, hung on a wall covered with an AstroTurf-like green fabric. There's also a group of white tendrils, attached to another wall, that come to life in an animated video in which they undulate with a single black strand.

In her essay on the show, curator Lily Siegel identifies some of the motifs as drawn from the artist's childhood: White cylinders with pink stripes derive from tube socks and plaid fabric from a Catholic schoolgirl's skirt. The nameless things don't add up neatly, though. If Williams's fleshy tableaux is a declaration of personal identity, it's a statement that can be read various ways.

Stephanie J. Williams: Things That Don't Have Names Through June 22 at Greater Reston Arts Center, 12001 Market St., Reston.

Alan Sislen

To judge from Alan Sislen's pictures at Multiple Exposures Gallery, the Bethesda, Md., photographer is most interested in swooping curves, dramatic angles and repeated motifs, which he finds primarily in D.C.-area modernist architecture. Yet the show's title is "Tonal Visions," emphasizing not the buildings' profiles but the grays and whites of their facades and the black skies that often frame them.

The skies aren't black because Sislen shoots at night. He shoots in color, then converts his images to higher-contrast black-and-white. Some of those skies are blue in the originals. (His "Tonal Visions" book, available for browsing at the gallery, shows before-and-after versions of the pictures.)

Sislen, who also depicts the occasional neo-Gothic or Art Deco structure, could have done something similar in the pre-digital era. While contemporary technology gives him more control of the tones, his sense of how to frame the composition is classic.

Alan Sislen: Tonal Visions Through June 15 at Multiple Exposures Gallery, Torpedo Factory Art Center, 105 N. Union St., Alexandria.

Joshua Miller

“I see our tools as an extension of ourselves,” Joshua Miller writes of his Corner Store gallery show. Perhaps that’s why the West Virginia artist, who’s also a builder and a furniture maker, gave human names to many of the nonfunctional implements in “When Tools Were Beautiful.” Rather than beget a diverse population, however, Miller constructed variations on a single theme.

All of the pieces are roughly the length of a standard broom, with thin poles that lead to various devices of no apparent purpose. The almost-tools are created using traditional joinery techniques, forgoing nails or screws, and made of locally sourced walnut and white oak, assembled to juxtapose light and dark wood. Supplementing the natural grain, some of the parts are etched with subtle patterns. The results are sleek and perfectly useless. Miller’s inventions aren’t exactly examples of form following function, but their forms are elegant nonetheless.

Joshua Miller: When Tools Were Beautiful Through June 16 at the Corner Store gallery, Ninth Street and South Carolina Avenue SE.