

Museums • Review

In the galleries: At three venues, modernist art that looks to the past

By Mark Jenkins

One major subset of modernist art is known for clean lines, elementary forms and pristine surfaces. Everything indirect, inessential and, above all, historical has been stripped away. But there's a charm to well-used old things, with their patinas, blemishes and hidden strata. Such aspects can be emulated, and even simulated. Three local artists — Cianne Fragione, Julie Wolfe and Khanh H. Le — are doing that in various ways in current shows.

Of the trio, Fragione comes closest to remaking an Old World. The pictures in “Gate to the Sea,” her exhibit at Gallery Neptune & Brown, resemble the weathered surfaces of centuries-old walls, tinged by weather and time. Yet the artist doesn't literally mimic such facades. Combining painting, drawing and collage, Fragione makes contemporary abstractions that feel rooted in the past.

The gate the artist unlocks leads to the Ionian Sea in the vicinity of Sicily, her family's ancestral homeland. She employs the hues of clay, rock and stone, sometimes set off by patches of blue that could represent sea, sky or both. (Green features only rarely.) Patterns in black suggest wrought-iron railings, while scratched-away pigment hints at damaged frescoes.

Fragione also includes other elements that indicate a human presence, such as scraps of women's clothing (a tribute to her dressmaking grandmother) and bits of penciled text, often crossed out. Scars that suggest natural attrition are actually made by the artist, whose gestures drew from her background as a dancer. However excavated Fragione's paintings and prints may appear, the traces she leaves are more personal than archaeological.



Cianne Fragione, *Gate to the Ionian Sea*, 2019, (Lee Stalworth/Courtesy of Cianne Fragione and Gallery Neptune & Brown)

Julie Wolfe's show at Hemphill Fine Arts is titled "Under Their Gaze, We Become Creatures." But that's just one of three series represented in this selection of brightly colored, often multilayered works the artist describes as a response to the 2016 presidential election.



Julie Wolfe, *Under Their Gaze, We Become Creatures 5*, 2019, Acrylic and ink on archival pigment print on 300 lb Arches paper, 57" x 43½" (frame: 62⅞" x 49")

Some of the inkblot designs are on found maps, and an eight-foot-tall ink drawing was made on glued-together book pages. One of the show's highlights, the drawing is symmetrical, if not a Rorschach-style blot. But it is titled "Mother," which sounds potentially Freudian.

Khanh H. Le also embellishes photographs, but the materials he uses are gaudier than Wolfe's. The collage paintings in "While We Waited," his Pyramid Atlantic Art Center show, are adorned with glitter, sequins, acrylic jewels and gold and silver pigment. The images beneath the ornamentation are not festive. They depict Vietnamese refugees who await possible resettlement in the United States. Le and his family were once among those people in limbo.

The "Creatures" are ink blot-like pieces akin to psychedelic Rorschach tests and ripe for black-light illumination. "Magnitude of Equality" offers geometric star-bursts in a rainbow of colors or just shades of gray. And "Venus: Site Specific" comprises printed black-and-white nature images or book pages that are overpainted with vivid translucent hues. These recall the varicolored water specimens that Wolfe has exhibited previously.

The coloring is often simple but deepened by the found imagery beneath. Wolfe repurposes old books, whether to paint atop individual pages or to stack them into sculptures such as "Short Stories VI," a wall-mounted array of brightly tinted bindings. A suite of 71 "Venus Series" color-washed pages occupies the gallery's nook (an architectural feature that may not exist in the Mount Vernon Triangle location to which Hemphill will relocate early next year).



Julie Wolfe, *Mother*, 2019, Sumi ink on found book pages, 93½" x 82"

A video monitor rotates some harsher portrayals of the exiles' circumstances: They linger on boats, in tents, behind chain-link fences and in makeshift dormitories. The family photos Le transfigures are seemingly commonplace images of domestic life, albeit sometimes with poignant details. In one, a little girl navigates a bicycle that has just one foot pedal.

Like a craft-store Andy Warhol, Le simplifies or obscures faces and turns landscape features into mere blocks of bright color. He also arrays 3-D lattices over and under parts of the pictures, echoing those detention-camp fences. The contrast between picture and decoration, Le writes, is "reflective of the tension within my identity."



Khanh H. Le, *We're Still Ok*, 2019, (Khanh H. Le/Photo: Daniel Delgado/Pyramid Atlantic Art Center)

[Cianne Fragione: Gate to the Sea](#) Through Nov. 16 at Gallery Neptune & Brown, 1530 14th St. NW.

[Julie Wolfe: Under Their Gaze, We Become Creatures](#) Through Nov. 16 at Hemphill Fine Arts, 1515 14th St. NW

[Khanh H. Le: While We Waited](#) Through Nov. 17 at Pyramid Atlantic Art Center, 4318 Gallatin St., Hyattsville, Md.