

Washington Is a Storm, One Piece of Art Can Be Your Anchor

Art can be the shelter and the fire. This is a guide for finding it.

BY [KRISTON CAPPS](#) — JAN 23, 2020 6 AM



"Among the Sierra Nevada, California" by Albert Bierstadt, 1868
PHOTOS BY DARROW MONTGOMERY

President Barack Obama's first inauguration was a blisteringly cold day for the District of Columbia. Millions of Americans braved below-freezing temperatures to greet the nation's first black president, with little more than a tangible feeling of optimism to warm the crowds on the National Mall. Street vendors hawked little one-use hand warmers to frigid attendees by the purseful. Tiny packets, little help.

One man found his own way to keep out the cold. He gathered tinder and crawled into a sculpture outside the National Museum of the American Indian. Inside he lit a fire and burned a brochure with Obama's face on it. It wasn't a protest. When a museum

security guard confronted him, the man, who was apparently homeless, said, “I’m just trying to get warm.”

The fire didn’t harm the tipi-like structure, called “Taa,” one of several outdoor pieces by the Santa Clara Pueblo sculptor Nora Naranjo-Morse. This work was never meant to last. Since 2007, her clay sculptures—altogether a series called “Always Becoming”—have slowly given way to elements both natural and manmade. Animals and insects have burrowed into the adobe, bamboo, and rawhide. The “Always Becoming” sculptures are bound to surrender to the ground that supports them.

For my money, “Always Becoming” offers the best view of the Capitol in the city. Look up at the dome from behind these mounds: Naranjo-Morse’s earthworks serve as a filter on power, a reminder that everything will return to the earth one day. Even the Senate. “Always Becoming” is a gimlet lens for seeing the fragility of the structures that stand up history and democracy.

It’s one of so many treasures in D.C. that people might not notice if they don’t go looking for it—a piece that a person might see without seeing. World-class collections line the Mall and dot the city, and historic public artworks grace everyday places. Informal masterpieces, too. Free museums make it easy. Yet art is hard to access, meaningfully, anywhere, no matter what, for people who don’t know where to start. Maybe especially so when the world is framed by uncertainty.

America’s civil liberties are eroding, the drumbeat of war is deafening, and a climate reckoning is upon us. The headlines are relentless, and life is hard enough without treacherous news. Art can’t save us, no. But for someone who’s struggling to find her feet after a divorce, or for someone who’s trying to drink less as a way of relaxing, or for someone who feels a growing sense of despair—art can bring clarity. Art can give us new questions for interrogating the world.

Art can be the shelter and the fire. This is a guide for finding it.

Over the last 20 years, I’ve come up with some rules for looking and seeing. The first is to find your anchor. Mine is “Interior With Egyptian Curtain” (1948) by Henri Matisse. The painting features brilliant splashes of color and line against a black room backlit by a window. I first saw “Egyptian Curtain” in a dark classroom at the University of Texas at Austin in the late ’90s. The image on the screen captivated me. I didn’t know anything about painting; slideshows were my introduction to art. It was years before I ever saw the painting in person.



"Always Becoming," by Nora Naranjo-Morse, 2007

What I noticed first about “Egyptian Curtain” is that nothing about the painting seems to work. The lemon hue of the fruit gathered in a bowl clashes with the dusty pink and sherbet colored table on which the bowl stands, and all the more so with the bold red and green swoops on the African curtain that frames the painting. Puzzled, I held onto the flashcard I printed for the course after I graduated.

When I stumbled upon the painting at the Phillips Collection, years later, I was stunned—there it was, a real object, hanging right there in front of me, in the city where I live. In the years since, I’ve seen it dozens of times. “Egyptian Curtain” never changes, but my thinking about the painting does. Lately, I linger over the inspiration that Matisse took from textiles. He was a voracious observer; he surrounded himself with things that inflected elements of his style. Working backward through Matisse’s eye opened doors for me. It’s a cringeworthy route into the collections at the National Museum of African Art, but Matisse got me there.

Finding an anchor in D.C. might seem like an assignment: Stroll past portraits of aristocrats in Elizabethan collars until one reaches out to grab you. Which sounds dismal! That’s because museum-goers tackle art museums all wrong. Visitors spend mere seconds with a painting before moving on to the next one, which is understandable given the pressure that people feel to see an entire museum in one go. Which is dismal.

Museums in D.C. make it easier to find an anchor, because they're humane (i.e., largely free). Making the most of the city's museums means, to me, shorter trips and longer looking.

Looking takes practice. I like to start by focusing on my senses and thinking inward: How do I respond to these colors, to this shape? Where does my eye want to go in this painting? Pulling apart all the decisions in a piece helps: the grain of a photo, the texture of a statue, the shape of a brushstroke. Lingering on each detail in isolation helps. A lot of times, I won't have any response right away. Days later, maybe weeks later, something about a performance or an installation might click—or a piece might just bury itself in my mind, demanding more attention.



"LEE UFAN: OPEN DIMENSION" BY LEE UFAN, 2019

“Among the Sierra Nevada, California,” an 1868 masterpiece by Albert Bierstadt, enjoys its own devotional space at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. With this painting, which the artist produced in Rome, Bierstadt sold a fantasy of a virgin American West to slaving European audiences. The landscape is luminous; the painter is canceled. Bierstadt’s vision of Manifest Destiny looks naive, even laughably so, in light of contemporary thinking on colonialism or scholarship on artists such as Kay WalkingStick.

Looking is not the same thing as liking. Appreciation means rubbing up against ideas that may not be all that pleasurable—or acknowledging that beauty often comes with an asterisk. Studying up helps, of course, but art doesn't need to feel like homework. Context should follow intuition and feel, the best guides of all. Sometimes the answers are confusing or elusive, but the place to start is with a question: How does looking at this thing make me feel?

Right now, there's something on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden that offers an easy introduction to looking. "Open Dimension," by the Korean artist Lee Ufan, comprises 10 sculptures from a series called "Relatum." His installations are exercises in balance and harmony, made in stone and mirrored steel. Right now, they're installed outside the museum, hugging its perimeter. (The Hirshhorn is rethinking what it means to program a sculpture garden, which too often read as sculpture graveyards.)

Ufan's work is minimalist: He belongs to the Japanese Mono-ha movement ("School of Things"), a cousin to the 1970s Arte Povera focus on natural or fugitive materials. Mirror and stone reflect and absorb the sunlight. Shadows from the Brutalist bunker of the Hirshhorn building redraw Ufan's compositions. These works will change with the seasons and the hour of the day. My bet is that anyone who witnesses these contemplative works twice will look for opportunities to see them again and again—much as people did with splashier spectacles at the Hirshhorn, like Doug Aitken's wrap-around museum projection, "SONG1," or Yayoi Kusama's pumpkin-spiced "Infinity Mirrors."

"Always Becoming," Naranjo-Morse's suite of Pueblo sculptures outside the National Museum of the American Indian, is another anchor—a piece that marches lockstep with nature, Washington's tempo be damned. (Although the rawhide that once covered "Taa" has since been removed, and there's a stump in place to prevent anyone from sitting inside.)

Artworks that will evolve with you are nestled inside galleries across the city. They're part of the city, too. Here's another rule for looking: Map the place where you live.

Every time I walk by Mount Vernon Square, I'm urged to commit a crime. There's a painting in a window at 6th Street and Massachusetts Avenue NW that's begging to be stolen.



A painting by Thomas Downing inside the law offices of Arnold & Porter

The painting is by Tom Downing, a stalwart of the Washington Color School, the late '60s and early '70s style for which D.C. is best known in art history. Like the other artists in this movement, Downing worked with acrylic on unprimed canvas, the Color School signature. He painted dots—bright, hard-edged, minimalist polka dots—decades before the notorious British artist Damien Hirst, best known for pickling sharks, would do the same thing.

(This isn't a rule, exactly, but the Color School is a place to start with art in D.C.: Works by these artists hang in the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and pretty much every other art institution in town—and also museums all across the nation. Once you see them, you never stop seeing them.)

Hanging over a seemingly pointless office stairwell, and visible to the street through a floor-to-ceiling window in Mount Vernon Square, is a Downing painting of 55 colorful dots. Stealing the painting would be a bad idea: It belongs to the law firm Arnold & Porter. The otherwise featureless stairwell appears to go nowhere, as if it were only there to be seen by me. This accidental gallery is a pin in my mental map of places across the city for catching an inadvertent glimpse of wonder among the mundane.

Those happy accidents are woven into apartment lobbies, law firm hallways, and government buildings throughout D.C. The best amenities of the ultra-luxe CityCenterDC condos, I'm convinced, are the disc-shaped paintings in the lobby by D.C. painter Linling Lu—works that I'd also like to liberate under cover of night. MGM National Harbor boasts a powerful painting by the late Kenneth Victor Young, an artist who only gained recognition for his contributions to the Color School in the years before his death. And every week, surely thousands of people walk by Martin Puryear's "Bearing Witness"—a monumental sculpture outside the Federal Triangle Metro Station—without noting how the hammer-formed bronze suggests military dread. (Puryear, who was born in D.C. in 1941, represented the United States in the most recent Venice Biennale, a prestigious post.)

Mapping art in the city means keeping tabs on formal and informal spaces. Galleries for finding work by local artists include Hemphill Fine Arts, Hamiltonian, and Transformer in Northwest, and Honfleur Gallery and the Anacostia Arts Center in Southeast. Some recent additions include Georgetown's von ammon co and De Novo Gallery at Union Market. The artist Julia Bloom operates Freight Gallery in the elevator of the apartment building where she lives in Langdon. Toss in the area's many university art galleries—to say nothing of outlying museums, like the enchanting mid-century Kreeger Museum in Foxhall or coolly elegant Glenstone in Potomac—and the map gets crowded fast. This is a good problem to have.

Find the things worth seeing again and again, then always take the scenic route. It's a revelation to discover how much permanent things change over time. The small arrow-shaped park by CityCenterDC, for example, is one of my favorite sites in the city, a uniquely sculptural park landscape. White Danby marble from Vermont and grey-green Flammet quartzite from Sweden frame the precision CNC-milled granite fountain (a feat of engineering). Designed by the women-led firm Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, the park fulfills the original call for fountains to punctuate the geometry of L'Enfant's plan. In winter, the park is subdued and steely; summer draws out the green veining in the marble.

Art is written on the walls of D.C., too, and these works tell stories about the city. The underpass of I-695, at 6th Street SE, features a bunch of faded reproductions of geometric paintings by Piet Mondrian, an artist who made his mark on abstraction in the early 20th century. Not far away, an even larger Mondrian reproduction once graced a 30-foot-tall windowless wall along the Ellen Wilson Dwellings, a public housing project.



Sculptural park landscape at CityCenterDC by the firm Gustafson Guthrie Nichol

The Capitol Hill homeowner and diplomat who commissioned these murals in 1988 was an odd kind of gentrifier. Warren M. Robbins donated more than 5,000 African artworks to the Smithsonian Institution, and he served as the founding director of the National Museum of African Art. Robbins fought for years before his death to preserve his Mondrian commissions. As public opinion soured on public housing during the Clinton era, the Ellen Wilson Dwellings project was demolished in the late '90s; neighbors stopped arguing over the Mondrian underpass, eventually, so now they're just fading away.

It's a lesson that informs another guide for looking. My mind's map is populated by long-since-closed galleries, shuttered collectives, and failed ventures. All the boldest murals will be painted over, assuming the walls don't fall first. At the risk of being maudlin, take it to heart: Go it alone, and keep something for yourself.

When my father died, after a sudden discovery of cancer in September 2018, I felt a need to see a piece far from my family's home in West Texas. Not an urgent desire, exactly, but a persistent itch. I needed to get to the Phillips Collection.

The Wax Room, a project by the artist Wolfgang Laib commissioned in 2013, occupies a space the size of a hall closet. For the uninitiated, the Laib Wax Room is an intimate installation, a room lined with fragrant yellow bees' wax and illuminated by a single bulb. I hadn't given much thought to the piece before, even after experiencing it a few times. But in my grief, from afar, it seemed like a warm place to be alone.

Returning to the Wax Room didn't give me the feeling I was looking for. It seemed like a silly idea, even, to search for comfort in art, once I found myself packed inside the Phillips' wax phone booth. I don't know what lessons to take away from that.

Yet another piece I saw at that time, at an exhibit at the National Gallery of Art by the sculptor Rachel Whiteread, moved me in a profound way. "CONTENTS" (2005), a set of plaster impressions that the artist cast from the boxes that she used to pack up her late mother's home, reminded me of the family history I was still sorting through. Tracing the negative impressions of familiar objects in order to make sense of them is a through-line in her ghostly minimalist works. It never occurred to me that seeing her work would make me ache.



"Bearing Witness" by Martin Puryear, 1997

There are no good rules for looking at art. Hitting up a gallery with a date, 'gramming a tour in a museum, bouncing through a boozy art pop-up—all of these can be routes into a moment with an artwork, or at least a diversion. Or at least fun. People-watching in the East Building is right up there with the Dupont Circle farmers' market on the list of good times to be had on a Sunday in D.C. Whether smartphones ruin the museum experience is a question of preference, like cork versus screw-cap tops for wine bottles or wearing jeans to the opera. Your mileage may vary.

This much I know: No place rewards you for being alone like the galleries. And being alone in a place designed to let you be alone is underrated. Looking happens in that interior space between the senses and the mind and the heart. It's hard to share the sensation. Looking is never lonely, though: Finding art means opening up to artists who are reaching out across years or decades or centuries to say something. Art is a reminder that no one is alone, even in times of darkness. Especially then: Find a fire, stay warm.