

To a Different Drum

In the 50 years since the Color School drew international notice, D.C.'s artists have mostly worked at a slight remove from the contemporary art world at large.

BY J.W. MAHONEY

Louis and Noland are curious about what goes on in New York, they show there, and have learned a lot there. But what they have learned mostly is what they do not want to do, and how to recognize what they do not want to do. When they return to Washington to paint it is to challenge the fashions and successes of New York, and also its worldly machinery . . . and insofar as they accept the consequences of their isolation they make all the more of a moral decision.

—Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland,"
Art International 4, no. 5, 1960

I AM NOT FROM DC. I lived there for 8 years, 6 years ago. —Tara Donovan,
Artforum.com, "Talk Back Blog," Dec. 6, 2002

Regionalism is so "over," isn't it? So when several Washington museums and art spaces decided to collectively generate a series of exhibitions, from the spring to the fall of 2007, highlighting the esthetic achievements of the Wash-

ington Color School—Washington's first (and so far only) internationally remarked-upon artistic movement—what, one wondered, would it seem like, culturally? How might it matter? "Color School Remix," the program's title, demonstrated how valid the work still seemed to be—as vital, sensual painting anyway—but the open, unasked question was: what has happened in D.C.-area art since the 1960s, when the Color School was in its prime?

The Color School established a local tradition, which has rarely resurfaced critically since—a tradition of symbolic image-making. Color School artists' inquiries into symbolic language emerged in their efforts to purify, maybe depersonalize, the grand personal symbolism of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock—the "right" Ab-Ex influences, according to Clement Greenberg, the mentor and benefactor of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis, Thomas Downing and the others. But what they were creating, in veils, stripes or circles, were abstract symbol systems, which Greenberg instead characterized as pure essays in abstractly painted expression, nothing so literary as a symbol.

In 2007's "Color School Remix" exhibitions, visually exciting one-person shows were created from the work of some Color School principals—Gene Davis at the Kreeger Museum and Leon Berkowitz at the Washington Arts Museum's space in an office building [see review, this issue]. There were several commercial gallery exhibitions of Color School-related works, and installations of Color School work were mounted at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the National Gallery, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Phillips Collection and the Hirshhorn Museum. The final, capstone show was the Hirshhorn's elegant "Morris Louis Now: An American Master Revisited."

The key word here, however, was "American," not "Washington." Since no major Washington museum has generated a group show of Washington-area artists since the Corcoran's "Washington Show" in 1985, this was a slight, but one that went unregistered locally. The D.C. scene now is basically numb to all hope of receiving any form of national institutional recognition except as it comes to individuals, who often leave town, as did Mary Beth Edelson, Martin Puryear and Tara Donovan (though Donovan was actually born in New York, with D.C. serving more as an interlude for her). Still, Washington artists are thoroughly if irregularly networked, as in any small Southern town (which, of course, D.C. is), into a socially familiarized, self-recognizing community. And, as individuals, they do whatever they want, like artists everywhere.

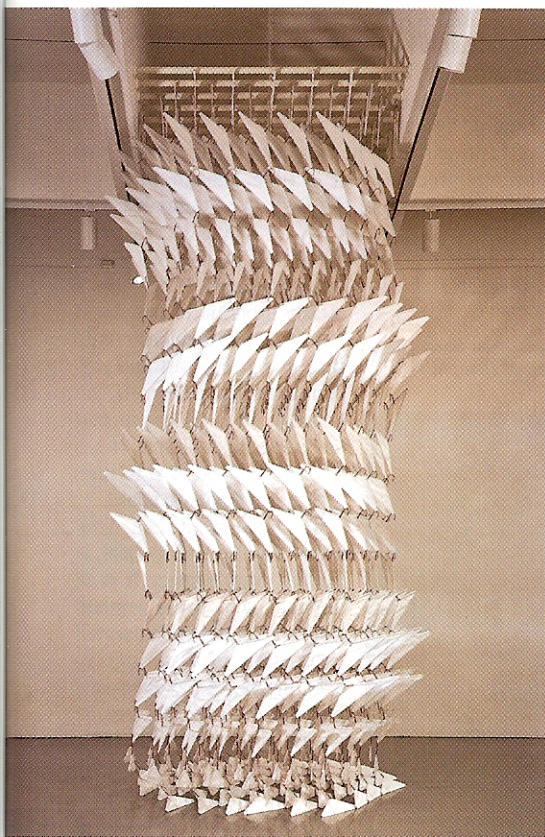
Except for the Corcoran, Washington's museums have always considered themselves "national" in both scope and mission, eschewing any regional mandate—unlike the museums of Chicago, Phila-



Partial view of Rosemary Covey's The O Project, 2007, digital print on Tyvek, approx. 15 by 300 feet overall. Courtesy Arlington Arts Center.

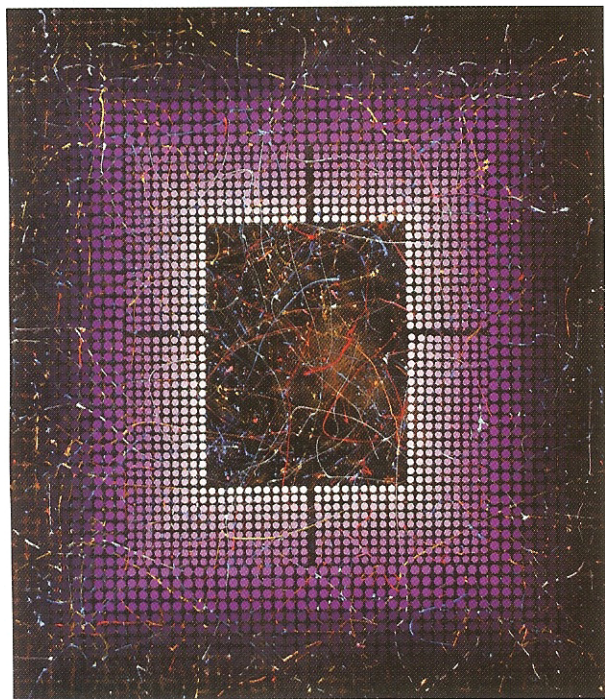
delphia and San Francisco, whose local artists are regularly celebrated in their halls. This attitude has crystallized into exhibition programs that favor one-person shows by nationally known Washingtonians, such as William Christenberry [see *A.i.A.*, May '07] or Sam Gilliam [see *A.i.A.*, Apr. '07], though both the Hirshhorn and the Corcoran continue to quietly collect and display pieces by area artists. (The Hirshhorn's show of its recent contemporary art purchases, which went on view last October and will remain there until this Oct. 1, includes works by several local artists, Dan Steinhilber and Linn Meyers notable among them.) But with no apparent impact on either national esthetics or local museum programs, Washington art since the 1960s has been an art of often highly educated loners, who remain outside the mainstream, for better or worse.

Generally, the city is still culturally stunted by the isolated, isolating qualities of politics here in recent years. The social Darwinist impulse that motivates the political class has permeated the city, providing a subliminal but persistent sense of opposing interests struggling for dominance. Also, D.C. regards itself—and rightly so—as the power



Dan Steinhilber: Untitled, 2002, paper-clad wire hangers, dimensions variable. Courtesy Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

This is conservative radical art—the kind D.C. might be presumed to produce—a hothouse for autonomous, unregulated imaginative activity of what may be seen as a post-postmodern sort.



Carol Goldberg: Brother's Portugal, 2007, acrylic on canvas with reflective chips, 96 by 84 inches. Courtesy Katzen Center at American University.

center of a nation at war. It has been under violent attack three times, in 1812, 1864 and 2001, and its air of civic vigilance is immediately apparent in the concrete blast barriers, blocked-off streets and heightened police presence that now characterize Washington. Visitors frequently say they sense a subtle climate of constant low-intensity fear in the city. And, unavoidably, these ever-present reminders of threat, whether real or imagined, tend to damp down D.C.'s cultural development.

So is the contemporary art of the Washington area a distinctly specialized, "alternative"—or even "outsider"—art? Few Washingtonians think so, except, perhaps, its artists. The artists, however, may have a point. Undaunted in their ongoing investigations into whatever seems visually meaningful to them, Washington artists radiate a culturally wired but unapologetically visionary attitude that features an almost patronizing relation to the larger world of contemporary art. D.C. artists still go to New York (or London, Venice or Miami) to process international trends, and whatever they don't reject they take back home for personal use. Information is power; accordingly, Washington artists tend to make art that is information-rich. This is a conservative radi-

cal art—the kind Washington might be presumed to produce—and it is a hothouse for autonomous, unregulated, undefined imaginative activity.

One current example may further illustrate the "outsider" quality that I see in Washington's art scene. As an epilogue to 2007's "Color School Remix" shows, in late February 2008 the Smithsonian American Art Museum mounted "Color as Field: American Painting 1950-1975." Organized by the American Federation of Arts, the exhibition appeared earlier in Denver and will move on to Nashville this summer. D.C. was an obvious venue, and the beautiful, intelligently inclusive show features not only Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Sam Gilliam and Gene Davis but almost all the artists in Clement Greenberg's "formalist" canon, along with their Abstract-Expressionist forebears. Neither of the catalogue's essays, by curator Karen Wilkin and by Carl Belz, mention, even once, the term "Washington Color School." Washington is referenced only as a place where Louis and Noland taught. That's it. (As an interesting coda, the museum is planning to use the gallery spaces where the show is located to exhibit, again, some of its Color School holdings, including some of Thomas Downing's larger masterworks.)

The Washington Project for the Arts (WPA), founded in 1976, was Washington's preeminent avant-garde institution from its advent until the mid-1990s, when, for reasons of space and money, it agreed to merge with the Corcoran. Only in 2007 did it become a separate entity again, since the Corcoran's newest director, Paul Greenhalgh, expressed little interest in offering the WPA much space, attention or respect.

The WPA's annual auction (which continued even when the WPA was part of the Corcoran) used to consist almost exclusively of art by artists living in the D.C. metropolitan area. A true rallying point for local art, it was Washington's own Whitney Biennial (though usually on display for no more than two or three weeks), and it served as a marketplace to introduce collectors to the D.C. scene, artists to collectors, and artists to each other. That was the past. In its present incarnation, the WPA counts on the auction, its big moneymaker, to fund local projects, including small exhibitions, a slide registry accompanied by an illustrated publication and a bi-annual "Options" show of emerging artists.

This year, the auction was held at the Katzen Center, with works selected by 10 "curators," only four of them from the Washington area, and only one of whom was in



Renee Stout: Ogun Power Object #2, 2007, iron, glass and mixed mediums, 24 by 10 by 10 inches. Courtesy Hemphill Fine Arts.

Washington before 2000. Since the WPA now characterizes itself as representing artists in Maryland, D.C. and Virginia, this auction's 107 artists included 52 artists from its mandated territory. A total of 26 artists were from Washington itself, outnumbered by 32 natives of the New York metropolitan area. According to the WPA's director, Kim Ward, this particular edition was the highest-grossing one in the last 10 years. Enough said.

Even so, Washington's visual art underground essentially nourishes itself. From the still-flourishing Transformer, Flashpoint, Pass and Gallery 10 spaces, to the now defunct Atlas & Le Droit Buildings, Signal 66, DC Space, the Warehouse spaces, Decatur Blue, the Insect Club, and N and O Street Studios, Washington has sustained an irregular level of genuinely alternative spaces.

Of two particularly avant-garde institutions that have endured the test of time, though, only one has a fixed address: the District of Columbia Arts Center on 18th Street NW, in Adams-Morgan, run for a decade by actor/director B. Stanley. With both a theater and an exhibition space, DCAC runs a

steady program of new local culture, spiced occasionally with unexpected art and performance from all over the country, in both group and one-person exhibitions. It has a small, dedicated staff and, luckily, a supportive board.

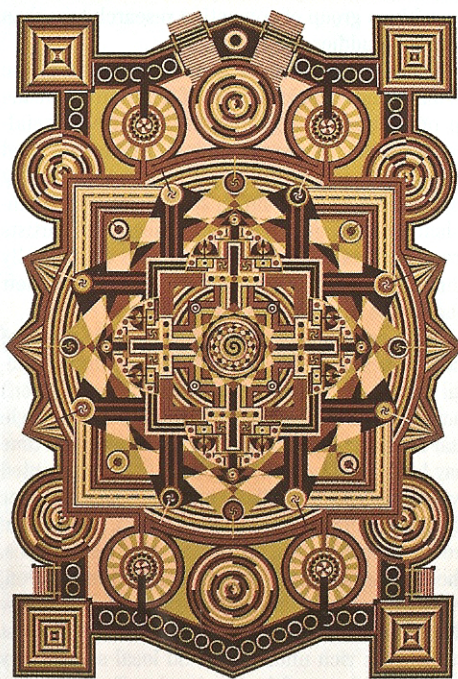
The other institution, Arto-matic, established in 1999, is fluid in every respect. It is an annual—sometimes semi-annual—resolutely non-curated exhibition of Washington-area artists, a pay-for-space proposition open to anyone at all who wants to show something they have made. It takes place anywhere large enough to accommodate the deluge of art that comes in, making exhibition spaces out of anything from a former

Robin Rose: Mine, 2006, encaustic on linen on aluminum, 24 by 18 inches; at Hemphill Fine Arts.



children's museum to two floors of an office building, to an enormous empty laundry complex. The presence of so much amateur work is overwhelming, prompting the *Washington Post's* chief art critic, Blake Gopnik, to compare visiting Artomatic to an extended dental appointment. But the beauty of Artomatic's esthetic anarchy is in its abundant innocence, not in any obviously savvy consideration of contemporary art issues. And, critically viewed, some surprisingly serious, innovative work crops up in unusual places, just around some unlikely corner of the show.

Washington's newest large-scale public exhibition space, the Katzen Center at American University, boasts three floors, some with 30-foot ceilings, and an outdoor sculpture space. Its director, Jack Rasmussen, was assistant director at the WPA in the 1970s, and later a local art dealer. His own programs feature Washington artists, though not exclusively. Last October he gave Carol Brown Goldberg a one-person show. Goldberg, whose history as a D.C.-area artist (she is also a major collector) began in the early 1980s, is an abstractionist whose recent works depict linear patterns of white circles painted over fields of Pollock-like splatters.



Jason Hughes: *Fortress 1809-1011.06*, 2006, gouache on paper, 67½ by 48½ inches. Courtesy Curator's Office.

Goldberg sees these images as symbolic portals into a metaphysical infinitude.

Across the Potomac, there are several nonprofit art spaces whose programs reach out to area artists, notably the McLean Project for the Arts and, in Arlington, the Arlington Arts Center (AAC) and the Ellipse gallery. Graphic artist Rosemary Feit Covey's installation at the Arlington Arts Center, "The 0 Project," opened on a cool night in early October 2007. Wrapped around the building were

wall-sized images, printed on Tyvek (a material from which hazmat suits are made), of a crowd of howling, bareheaded men, symbolic of the social anxiety that grips the world these days. A crowd of real people also gathered outside for a dance performance by BosmaDance. The piece featured black-shrouded women convulsing and collapsing—all with Rosemary's images of shouting men as a backdrop. Her paper works, which she sells out of her studio in Alexandria, are just as mythically dramatic as these, but more framable, portraying narratives of sexual exhibitionism, plague and natural flora.

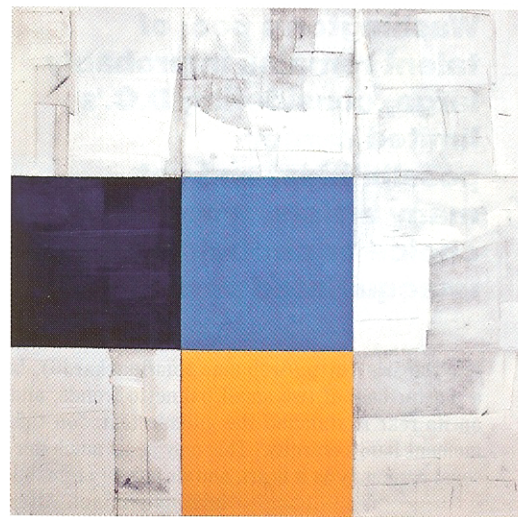
The AAC's other exhibitions last fall were a series of solo shows in the center's several rooms, and downstairs, seen in darkness, were the video installations of Gillian Brown. Like 19th-century spiritualist phenomena, Brown's projections evoke the idea of portals between the visible and invisible worlds. *Untitled (brain/conception)* consists of a white-gauze cast of a nautilus shell, set inside a wire armature, onto which Brown projects a series of spiraling video images—flying birds, whirling dervishes, swirling vortices of numbers—all meant to evoke the inner dynamics of inspiration.

The director of exhibitions at AAC is Jeffrey Cudlin, a writer, musician and performance artist whose recent project, *Ian and Jan*, made with collaborator Meg Mitchell, documents a fictitious pair of Color School performance artists who are portrayed as formerly famous but now forgotten. Jeffrey successfully enlisted the comic support of many of Washington's artists, curators and writers in his pseudo-documentation of Ian and Jan's tragic but heroic history.

Washington's newest, most fashionable art hub is to be found at 1515 14th Street NW, which houses a restaurant and four of Washington's more advanced contemporary galleries: Curator's Office, G Fine Art, David Adamson Gallery and Hemphill Fine Arts. Robin Rose, by now a Washington "elder," exhibited at Hemphill in October 2007. His encaustic-on-linen-on-aluminum panels are both minimalist abstract essays in texture and color, and serious allegorizations of economic theory, cultural historiography, musical composition and other systematized disciplines.

Fellow artists at Rose's opening included James Huckenhahler, who makes computer-generated images whose textures and simulated spaces closely resemble psychedelically induced hallucinations, and younger D.C. artists Jason Hughes and Mary Early. Hughes, who shows at Curator's Office, creates neo-Duchampian propositions in graphics and three-dimensional objects (such as a Tibetan mandala made of ranks of toy soldiers). Early, who is a Hemphill gallery associate as well as one of the gallery's artists, makes primal geometric forms in wood that she then ritually purifies by laying down a surface of golden wax.

Renee Stout's show at Hemphill, in September 2007, was a more haunted affair, involving an ongoing narrative—in collaged paintings, drawings and sculptures—of the life of "Fatima Mayfield," a practitioner of sacred African traditions. Stout's pieces feel far more authentically magical than safely estheticized. At the opening, the lights were kept low by design, and the crowd was restless but quiet, often transfixed.



Matthew Langley: *Come From Heaven, 2007*, oil on canvas, 54 inches square. Courtesy District of Columbia Arts Center.

In March 2007, Civilian Art Projects, at 406 7th Street NW, opened a show of Jason Zimmerman's found-object photos, and in front of an image of a large beetle crawling on a chipped plate, Champneys Taylor and Erick Jackson were talking about David Lynch's film *Inland Empire*. (Besides his photography, Zimmerman also creates tense, staged videos of unexpected situations—being chased by the police, for example.) Champ's own work, which stretches from nostalgic collaged retrievals from '60s magazine advertising, to his video studies of a rotating golden apple, exemplify the fiercely eclectic spirit of his collective, Decatur Blue, a group of Washington artists whose space above a body shop on Florida Avenue was Washington's most radical alternative space until 2007, when it was forced to relocate, eventually to a MySpace page. Erick is the bass player of the Apes, one of D.C.'s stronger alternative bands, and his girlfriend, Jayme McLellan, is Civilian Art Projects's director. In 2002 she, along with dealer Victoria Reis, created Transformer, a vital nonprofit gallery on P Street, near 14th Street NW.

At Zimmerman's opening, three of Washington's more seasoned art professionals ran into each other, sculptors Betsy Packard and Jeff Spaulding, along with Jeff's wife, Andrea Pollan, whose work as an independent curator continues in her own gallery, Curator's Office. Jeff and Betsy, together with sculptor Yuriko Yamaguchi, were featured in a three-person show in one of the WPA's most significant exhibitions in the early 1980s. Spaulding's recent show, in September 2007, ambiguously titled "Mine," at G Fine Art, was a festival of other intentional ambiguities, both narrative and symbolic. His power and talent are expressed by bringing together new and found objects, as in the piece playfully titled *Adrift*, which consists of a set of plastic bowling pins sheltered, imprisoned or surrounded by a pair of inner tubes.

Betsy uses ordinary materials—from old clothing to emptied plastic packaging to dried roses—as the formative elements of poetically autonomous, oddly alluring statements. *Crossed Swords*, pictured on

Washington's pool of talent remains improbably large, considering D.C.'s limited career possibilities, and yet many artists, whether by choice or circumstance, are unacquainted personally.

her website (<http://web.mac.com/lpackard6>), is a plaster cast of two small palmetto fronds, and on its rear is stamped the gnomic text: "on this moment hangs eternity." This may be as much personal ceremony as it is art, and its mystery remains invitingly intact. After a long gallery association at the now-departed Anton Gallery in the '80s and '90s, she has lately been exhibiting in group shows, at Signal 66, District of Columbia Arts Center, Pass Gallery, the McLean Project for the Arts and the long-standing Washington Sculptors' Group.

Two other web presences should be noted. One of the city's more daring art dealers, Leigh Conner, is relocating her Connecticut Avenue gallery to a site in the Trinidad neighborhood, a rapidly gentrifying inner-city zone in Northeast Wash-

ington. For now, she deals by appointment at her old location and on the Internet (connercontemporary.com). Clearly, she's committed to supporting local art, from representing the estate of Washington Color School master Downing, to her "gogo art projects," which offer exhibitions to selected D.C.-area graduate students and locals who also show in her gallery. Currently on the website are D.C. artists Brandon Morse, known for his radically abstract digital video works, and Erik Sandberg, whose narrative figural paintings are reminiscent of both Internet porn and 1930s German realism. Conner's new space has the potential to open up an entirely new art neighborhood.

The other notable website is that of local collector and blogger, Phillipa Hughes (pinkline.org), who seeks to address three important shortcomings of the D.C. art scene. First, Washington's educated young professionals remain generally undeveloped as a resource for the local art market. Second, the city's older, more established artists are often hard to find on gallery walls. And finally, much of D.C.'s recent art history exists only orally or on the pages of older, often defunct art magazines. What pinkline.org offers is Hughes's own, accurately sourced events calendar of Washington's contem-

porary art life, including projects she sponsors herself—a night of graffiti art at the AAC, for example, or her occasional "salons" at a local bar.

Artist Kevin MacDonald died of cancer in the summer of 2006, and a memorial service of sorts was held at his Silver Spring, Md., studio in the fall of 2007—a Halloween evening ceremony with both an open fire and a magicienne/dancer. MacDonald was known for his magic-realist approach to landscape, interiors and still life, and he often invested scenes set in his suburban neighborhood with the quiet, numinous radiance of a fairyland. Michael O'Sullivan, the only D.C.-area art critic to be taken seriously by local artists, was in attendance, passing around cut-out pieces of Kevin's last, undrawn-upon sheet of Arches paper. On the wall of the studio was a suite of his late works, four horizons, just sea and sky, in pastel, colored pencil and watercolor. His wife, Robin, was very discomfited, she said, by these pictures made by someone who may have been accommodating himself to dissolving into the infinities these images represent.

Another elegiac evening, this one devoted to former Washingtonian Jeremy Blake, also took place in late 2007. Jonathan Binstock, now with Citibank's art advisory services and living in New York, curated a show of Blake's last looped videos for the Corcoran, where until recently he was curator of contemporary art. The opening was a small, and semi-private affair. Titled "Wild Choir: Cinematic Portraits by Jeremy Blake," the show was held in a darkened first-floor gallery space, where wall-sized screenings of Blake's riotous video collage-portraits ran continuously. Dedicated to specific alternative-culture heroes of the artist, from Ossie Clark to Malcolm McLaren, these portraits consisted of cascading suites of colorful digitized

images including magazine nudes, psychedelic butterflies, swashes and drips of electronic paint, bananas shooting lightning bolts and other, equally imaginative offerings—a very speculative symbolism, indeed [see *A.i.A.*, Apr. '08].

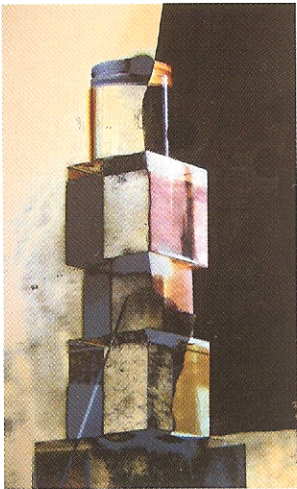
Blake grew up in Washington, took his first art classes at the Corcoran and by the late '80s was running his own teenage art gang. Then he left D.C. to study in Chicago before going on to make his career in New York and Los Angeles. Like fellow Washingtonians Simon Gouverneur and Carroll Sockwell, he was a suicide. On this commemorative evening he came home, in a strange way.

The artist population of Washington remains improbably large, considering D.C.'s limited career possibilities. Joe White, Inga Frick, Greg Hannan, Lynn Schmidt, Beverly Ress, Susan Eder, Bill Newman, Renee Butler, Bill Willis, Margaret Boozer, Kurt Godwin, Leddell Moe, Shahla Arbabi, Colby Caldwell, Judy Jashinsky, Chip Richardson, Tazuko Ichikawa, Ryan Hackett, Annette Pollan, Tom Green, Josephine Haden, Graham Caldwell, Nan Montgomery, Steve Kushner, Virginia Daley, Maggie Michael, Jeff Smith, Sharon Fishel—any of these artists might just as easily have been included in this article. Many of them are strangers to each other personally and, collectively, look more like a group of competing research labs than a crew of buddies at a sports bar.

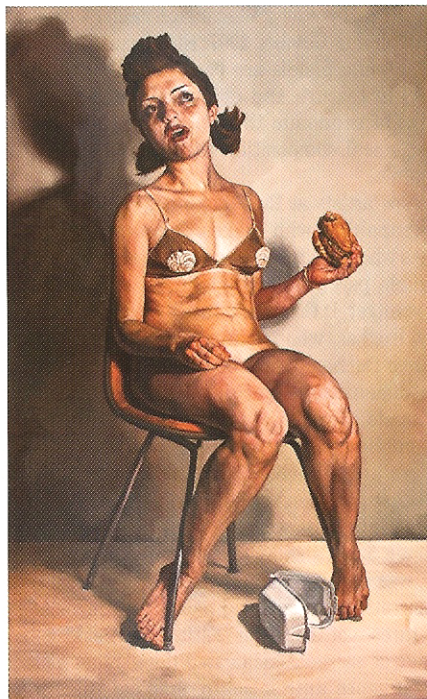
Or maybe like a mycelium? A mycelium is the underground organic support of a mushroom, made up of individual organisms that unite, specialize into tasks like synthesizing enzymes for food production, and occasionally generate a fruiting body—a mushroom—full of spores, scattering individual seeds for new mycelia. Similarly, D.C. artists are self-sustained, but socially and esthetically sensitive to each other, however spread out their studios and living spaces are.

This localized connectivity may be emblematic of the post-postmodern art world. The sort of magisterial control (along with deadly, neurotic competition) rooted in the assumption that there is but a single vital discourse in contemporary art at any given time may be dying. That vital discourse, once represented by Greenberg's formalism, has given way to Peter Sloterdijk's notion of culture as "foam." Now there are many equally valid discourses, all in play at once. The openness to both information and inspiration, world culture and useful theories, may be a new phase of modernism, perhaps a transmodernism—at the least, a rich uncertainty. So local scenes may indeed have a powerful intrinsic value, if only because their impulses may be authentically and immediately inspired. Washington's art culture was founded by a group of artists both responsive and resistant to what they saw as the capitalized esthetics of New York, and that basic resistance still continues—but not without respect. Artists in Washington do envision a radiantly positive future for their work somehow, some way. For the present, though, they're mostly busy working in their studios, getting on with the task at hand. □

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Marilee H. Shapiro: Stack, 2007, digital image on paper, 15 by 9 inches. Courtesy plan b.



Erik Sandberg: Gluttony (from "The Seven Deadly Sins" series), 2007, oil on canvas, 102 by 60 inches. Courtesy Conner Contemporary Art.