

Watercolor Society's splashes of convention, abstraction



A portion of Julia Read's "Drama Queen" now on display at the Bernice Kish Gallery, (Courtesy photo)

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Watercolor is a medium that obviously can be used to depict just about any subject, but it seems especially apt for natural scenes. The Baltimore Watercolor Society's exhibit at the Bernice Kish Gallery at Slayton House has the added advantage of being on view during the spring.

You can enjoy nature blooming outside the gallery and then step indoors and see that some of the watercolors have similar subject matter. This is most directly the case with Bonita Glaser's "Cherry Blossoms." Although the floral peak has passed outdoors, those cherry blossoms remain in perpetual bloom in Glaser's watercolor. Indeed, it depicts a grove of cherry trees that provide an all-pink canopy above a boisterously green lawn.

The melting qualities associated with watercolor can be seen to especially good advantage in Margitta Hanff's "Morning Mist." This subdued natural scene has gentle shades of white and brown melting together in a marshy shore. There is an in-between quality to the area where the land meets the water, of course, and so watercolor seems like just the right medium for this subject.

Besides the many additional artists in the exhibit who look to the natural environment for inspiration, there are also some who examine the built environment.

A striking example of the latter is April Rimpo's 'Gothic Pinnacles.' It precisely captures the architectural detail of a Gothic church. This includes the subtle interplay between shades of white and pale purple on the stone facade, suggesting how light affects the way in which we see the church. It's also a nice artistic touch to have a large tree located next to the church, because this tree gives both a sense of scale and an eye-catching contrast thanks to its bright green foliage.

How people interact with the environment is of interest to a number of artists.

In the foreground of Carolyn Councill's "Rain Sale" is a basket filled with vividly colored umbrellas. Umbrellas that have such attention-grabbing colors as yellow, red and blue serve as a reminder that they do not have to be black; indeed, the umbrella designs also include a floral print motif. The umbrellas amount to an assertion that you do not have to totally submit to the gloom of a rainy day. This watercolor also incorporates several figures in the background who hold raised umbrellas. These figures are so schematically rendered, however, that they are not meant to represent specific individuals. Instead, they reinforce this watercolor's overall reliance upon simplified slices of pure color.

Two people enjoying themselves on a dry day can be seen in Joyce Bell's "Hats On - Shoes Off." These women rest on a park bench next to an invitingly blue lake. We see them engaged in conversation, with their backs to us. It's a private conversation in a public place.

For another hat-reliant scene, look at Cheryl Elmo's "Orange Hat." It's not clear where this single woman is seated, because the densely painted background is an abstracted mass of painterly dabs and drips. The one thing that's easy to see is that there is an orange hat firmly placed atop this woman's head.

A few artists in the exhibit play games with compositional conventions. In fact, there are a couple of watercolors that are downright disorienting.

Denny Bond's "Illusion" relies upon a black-and-white polka dot pattern for the ample garment that covers the body and head of a woman. Moreover, that same polka dot patterning is used for the entire background. As if that weren't enough to make you slightly dizzy, there are nine dragonflies depicted against that background.

To get even more dizzy, look at Karen Norman's "Whirling." It's a seemingly conventional still-life composition in which five apples rest in a clear glass bowl. That bowl has swirling blue lines in it, though, and this still-life composition is presented from such a high-angle perspective that it engenders a visually swirling effect.

Almost all of the artists in this exhibit create representational watercolors, but many also rely upon some degree of abstraction. Venturing into complete abstraction is Charles Reiher's "Cosmos IV," in which melting shades of green, orange, yellow and blue flow so freely that this is truly a watercolor.

The Baltimore Watercolor Society has an exhibit running through May 5 at the Bernice Kish Gallery at Slayton House, 10400 Cross Fox Lane in Wilde Lake Village Center in Columbia. Call 410-730-3987.