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Pushing Boundaries In One Building

By [Michael O'Sullivan](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, May 19, 2006; Page WE67

Visitors this month to 1515 14th St. NW, the multi-gallery building in the Logan Circle neighborhood, will find a little bit of, well, maybe not everything, but as much this-and-that as you're likely to encounter on the menu of Viridian, the fashionable, newish restaurant downstairs.

The fare includes two long-standing Washington artists: sculptor Jeff Spaulding and painter Steven Cushner, who are making some of their best work these days. Also on the bill is Ledelle Moe, a South African-born, Washington-based sculptor in her thirties, who keeps pushing the boundaries of her chosen medium -- concrete -- which turns out to be surprisingly expressive. Two recent art-school grads, both 2001 MFA recipients, represent the under-30 crowd: Laurel Nakadate, a buzzed-about New Yorker, here contributes a suite of disturbing, performance-based photographs and video, while sculptor John Watson hews closer to the traditions of tried-and-true modernism, offering an installation of found wood scraps.

You'll find politics on display -- not just global but personal -- along with works that probe puzzles both formal and psychological. Old school meets new school, with some unexpected affinities.

Given that Cushner is a painter whose roots have been nourished by the soil of the Washington Color School, and given that his concerns are largely formal ones -- like those of Caio Fonseca, whose



"Pierce," by Jeff Spaulding. (By Jeff Spaulding)

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work Cushner's occasionally evokes -- the artist's newest acrylic-on-canvas abstractions and paper sketches, on view at Hemphill Fine Arts, feel remarkably vigorous. Transitioning from his trademark, but generally monochrome, gestural abstraction, while retaining the drips of dilute paint he's known for, Cushner incorporates chunks of often vibrant color in his latest works. Assembled like building blocks, the paintings nevertheless obey an intuitive, organic order, rather than any rigid sense of color theory.

Also on view at Hemphill is Watson's "Always Find a Way," a walk-in wooden construction on stilts whose birdhouse-shantytown flavor makes it a nice companion piece to Cushner's architectural jazz.

Moe's installation in the project room of G Fine Art is also a departure of sorts for the artist, from the monumental scale she's known for. Comprising hundreds of anonymous, fist-size heads, hand-carved from damp concrete and mounted to every wall on metal armatures, "Congregation" evokes a museum's antiquities collection, yet its concerns couldn't be more modern. With their sightless, accusatory eyes, the members of this "Congregation" draw our attention to the human -- and cultural -- toll of the ongoing conflict in the part of the world known as the cradle of civilization.

Spaulding's work in that gallery's main space is aptly titled "Mine." Continuing the themes raised in his appearance at the last Corcoran Biennial, the artist's subtle manipulations of found objects -- brightly colored plastic bowling pins, hobby-horse covers turned inside-out and other children's toys -- evoke startling, often explosive psychological resonance. Using humor, sex and a vague sense of menace, the artist invites each of us to burrow deeper into his or her own private Idaho, where more than potatoes are likely buried.

Nakadate is similarly unafraid of the dark, but in a way that's more troubling. In photographs and videos, the artist documents episodes of semi-public striptease, most notably in front of the window of a moving train's sleeper car, from which she also tosses -- and then photographs -- her panties. At times evoking the abusive aesthetic of kiddie porn, at others the joyless rote of pay-per-view peep shows, this body of work, bundled under the name "Trouble Ahead, Trouble Behind," is almost sickening in its soul-deadness.

A mix of voyeurism and exhibitionism, naivety and hard-eyed self-appraisal, cool cynicism and sexual heat, Nakadate's cutting-edge art is meant to get under your skin, and it does. That she offers no easy antidote for -- or even any convincing argument that she's fully aware of -- its toxic effects on the viewer is both the source of its problematic nature, and its undeniable power.

STEVEN CUSHNER

JOHN WATSON: ALWAYS FIND A WAY

Both through June 17 at Hemphill Fine Arts. 202-234-5601. <http://www.hemphillfinearts.com>. Open Tuesday-Saturday 10 to 5. Free.

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JEFF SPAULDING: MINE

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*Both through June 17 at G Fine Art. 202-462-1601.
<http://www.gfineartdc.com>. Open Tuesday-Saturday 11 to 6.
Free.*

*LAUREL NAKADATE: TROUBLE AHEAD, TROUBLE BEHIND
Through June 3 at Adamson Gallery. 202-232-0707.
<http://www.adamsongallery.com>. Open Tuesday-Friday 11:30 to 5; Saturdays noon to 5. Free.*

All galleries are at 1515 14th St. NW (Metro: Dupont Circle).

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