"Academy 2013"
At Connersmith to Aug. 24

By Kriston Capps • July 19, 2013

Armando López Bircann, "Refraction 2" (2012)

The lion's share of noteworthy artists in "Academy 2013"—the annual invitational survey of work by area art students—hails from the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Even as the school is taking a life raft from the University of Maryland, the Corcoran is proving its value to the region. Six of the 20 artists in the show graduated with bachelor's degrees from the college this year (and another graduated with a BFA

in 2004). As ever, "Academy" is a mixed bag, but this year's offerings are marked by strong personalities.

It's not often that a commercial-gallery show of mostly untested artists features so much performance. Four of the artists in the show—recent Corcoran alums Armando López Bircann, Annie Hanson, and Rachel Hrbek as well as the Maryland Institute College of Art's Mihaela Savu—contribute performance works. Hrbek's "Easy Consumption" comprises the video documentation of a piece she previously performed at the Corcoran for its 2013 "Next" exhibition of student work. Lopez Bircann, Hanson, and Savu, on the other hand, performed their works live at the Connersmith opening.

López Bircann's "Refraction 2" is an "Academy" standout, a fashion-sculpture installation of sorts. For his performance, the artist models a plastic sculptural carapace that falls somewhere between the architecture of Zaha Hadid, the fashion of Viktor & Rolf, and the ACME flying suits of Wile E. Coyote. A perfect peacock, López Bircann tugs on various strings to bring his dress from its rest state to full bloom, at which point he appears to be encased in a plastic star or a spiky echinoderm.

Hanson's performance—in which she bakes bread batter on site and stuffs dough under towels, on which she then lays her head—is totally affectless The same could be said of Mihaela Savu's piece: She mumbles from a text while wearing a sculptural dress covered in aluminum, shell-shaped medallions. There's not a great deal of emotional satisfaction to be found in "Academy 2013." Much of the work comes across as academic, but that may be unsurprising.

There's nothing necessarily wrong with taking the academic route, either. Jay Hendrick's studiously casual paintings fit a vital trend in abstract painting today, a geometric unseriousness worthy of such rising painters as Amy Feldman or Patrick Brennan. The sculpture in "Academy 2013" hits the mark, too: Steven Skowron's "Bound Desire" piece, a steel-wire cube bound and bowed by a knotted rope, is the funniest work in the show. I liked Jeremiah Holland's wood sculptures at the Corcoran "Next" show, and I like his black-walnut and poplar "Wall Table #2" here for not quite being a piece of useful furniture. Wood is a trend in this show: University of Maryland MFA Pat McGowan contributes two handsome towering, winding wood sculptures.

It would be a mistake to read too much into the concerns of D.C. area art-school graduates from the small sample that "Academy" provides. But it is easy to tell that series founder and curator (and Connersmith partner) Jamie Smith favors smart work. A suite of portraits from Kyle Hackett, Vincent Hui, and Jason Edward Tucker could be a mini-exhibit on high-minded portraiture in D.C. If the sample in "Academy 2013" is at all representative, then the area's art students are grappling with all the right questions.