

# The Washington Post

## Art review: 'Academy 2014' at Connersmith Gallery ([www.washingtonpost.com/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/))

By Michael O'Sullivan  
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A recent visit to [Connersmith Gallery](#) found the art space in a state of mild disarray, with wooden packing crates scattered here and there, amid power tools and unhung paintings leaning against the wall. Yet there was no moving van in sight.

The contemporary gallery will soon vacate its Trinidad digs — having recently announced the [sale of its building](#) to Capital Fringe — but it still has one more show before closing its doors. The clutter was the result of installing “[Academy 2014](#),” the 14th edition of the gallery’s summer invitational showcase of work by students from area art schools, and the last show in this space.

Front and center in the large main room stood “Interregnum,” a surreally beak-muzzled yet otherwise lifelike equestrian sculpture by American University grad Joshua James Johnson. The statue, which brushes the overhead lights with its black feathered headdress, evokes [Washington’s military statuary](#) — albeit with a nod to one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. It’s a striking centerpiece in a room filled with work curated around the themes of religion, race, crime, war and violence.

My sneak peak at the show came courtesy of Jamie Smith, who selected the 17 artists for this show from seven regional art schools and who, with partner Leigh Conner, opened the edgy art space 15 years ago in a second-floor walkup near Dupont Circle.

Other standouts in Connersmith’s front room include Erick Antonio Benitez’s series of painted portraits of tattooed gangbangers, and a large, abstract wall sculpture by Emerson Myers. Although it’s as pretty as pop art, Myers’s pockmarked piece also is powerful. The indentations across its cratered surface represent actual nuclear detonations by the former Soviet Union, catalogued by size. Across the room hangs a simple bedsheet with the outline of a human body.

Although that work, by Levester Williams, resembles the chalk outline of a crime scene, it has other evocations as well. The sheet, from actual prison bed linens, suggests a modern Shroud of Turin, removed from a tomb of a different kind and representing another form of martyrdom.

The works in the back gallery are generally more oblique. Dominating the space is a 20-foot-long sculpture of a fish-tailed merman by Cameron Stalheim. Titled “and then

I saw Colby on the street and my fantasy died,” the work was cast from the body of Baltimore-based porn actor Colby Keller (who, like Stalheim, is a graduate of the Maryland Institute College of Art). The piece, which features an ambiguous orifice, poetically alludes to the “otherness” of gay sexuality.

Other deeply personal works include a series of quiet self-portraits by Scarlett McCalman. They were created on typewriters and incorporate text written by the artist. But her words are obscured by overlapping letters, so that the meaning remains forever private, even as the artist's face emerges.

The exhibition also features six vintage typewriters, stacked like sculpture. Walking through the show, trends and themes emerge. Portraiture continues its strong showing, in colorful paintings by Ali Seradge. And the human body appears throughout.

Sometimes its presence is literal, as in the work of Stalheim and Steven Skowron, who contributes photographs of his naked form squeezed into wooden sculptures. Sometimes its presence is only felt, or implied through absence, as in Williams's work. Other artists who reference the human body, or body parts, include Ceci Cole McInturff, Lauren Shea Little, Lorenzo Cardim and James Bernard Cole, whose work consists of a tire hanging from a rope in the gallery's courtyard.

Cole's sculpture is deceptively simple. On one level, it's an ordinary tire swing. In the context of “Academy,” it evokes a gallows.

It's the kind of dialogue between artworks that one has come to expect from Connersmith. Although it will soon close its doors, the gallery plans to carry on that conversation somewhere else, someday.

Connersmith's next project is the annual [\(e\)merge art fair](#), which it operates out of the [Capitol Skyline Hotel](#) each fall. The gallery plans to continue participating in national and international art fairs, and a new bricks-and-mortar home is, according to Smith, inevitable. She notes that she and Conner have already started sniffing around the Logan Circle area.

## The story behind the work



(Maggie Schneider/Connersmith)

Maggie Schneider's work simultaneously addresses both the presence and the absence of the body.

Called "Projection/Painting 4," the installation centers on a two-second video clip of the artist, who also has performed as a dancer, shaking her booty in shorts and a tank top. Projected onto the gallery wall in one continuous loop, like a shorter version of a Vine video, Schneider's moving self-portrait is surrounded by a penumbra of rainbow-hued auras that she painted directly onto the wall.

Representing multiple frames of the video — which the artist replayed, in slow motion, and painted on top of, over the course of several days — the psychedelic silhouettes show not just where Schneider's body is at any given instant but also where it has been.

### Academy 2014

Through Aug. 9 at Connersmith Gallery,  
1358 Florida Ave. NE. 202-588-8750.

[www.connersmith.us.com](http://www.connersmith.us.com).

Open Tuesday-Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Free.



(Joshua James Johnson/Connersmith)





(Cameron Stalheim/Connersmith (Photo Ryan O'Donnell))