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(e)merge Art Fair: This show may leave you singing

By Lavanya Ramanathan on October 5, 2012



Mandy Cano Villalobos: 'Voces'

This weekend, nearly every corner of the Capitol Skyline Hotel will buzz with art and artists, gallerists and would-be collectors when the upstart (e)merge art fair returns to its Southwest Washington hub.

Those expecting paintings mounted on walls, however, might want to check their presumptions at the door. With 14 performances in the works, the fair will be much less a staid art convention than a three-day happening.

In its second year, the emerging-art fair founded by Leigh Conner and Jamie Smith of the Connersmith gallery and art-fair veteran Helen Allen (founder of the Pulse Art Fair) brings together more than 80 galleries and artists who are setting up shop in the retro, Morris Lapidus-designed Skyline.

Last year, the biggest challenge for (e)merge exhibitors was thinking outside the standard white-walled box -- and working in small, dark hotel rooms lined with striped, sulfur-colored wallpaper. This year, artists and organizers say, they're learning to better work within the (idiosyncratic) space. Lighting in the impromptu galleries/hotel rooms has been improved, and food will be offered on-site to fairgoers (a prix-fixe menu of Sri Lankan fare will run \$10 to \$15). And to avoid a repeat of last year's hallway jams, Conner promises, "there will be an easier way to get people from upper floors to lower floors."

Art fairs, unlike exhibitions or festivals, are generally about marketing galleries and artists to collectors. But what's striking about the (e)merge schedule is that it's packed with performances that aren't necessarily salable.

"There are a number of motivations for the fair," Smith explains. "We love bringing good-caliber international galleries to show work by emerging artists from all over the world. It's also very important for us to make an art fair that's a place for artists, not just a place that's for the commercial aspects of art." The performance artists, nearly all unrepresented by galleries, bring an undeniable exuberance and sense of interactivity to the proceedings.

Over the course of (e)merge, which opens Friday, one artist will set adrift on a coffin for 36 consecutive hours in the hotel pool better known for its boozy summertime parties. Another artist will subject herself to a cruel device like those once used to suppress dissidents. A third will wait, blindfolded, for fairgoers to step up and sing along, karaoke-style, to his compositions. And on Friday, a panel that includes contemporary-art curators from major Washington museums will explore the impact of performance, which, after a heyday in the 1960s and '70s, is again white hot -- thanks in part to New York's Performa festival and the revival of artists such as Marina Abramovic.

"There's something consumable about performance art that paintings on a wall don't allow," says Sheldon Scott, who will be performing his multimedia piece "Down in the Valley."

"There's so much in the breadth and the body of the space that you just don't get in other media. . . . It's a complicated version of visual arts. When it's gone, it's gone. "

Here's a sampling of what you can see at (e)merge:

'Self Portrait as Ishmael'

In the inky-black, pre-dawn hours on Friday, before the fair begins, artist Andrew Wodzianski will set himself adrift in the Skyline's outdoor pool in an exercise in endurance (and, perhaps, irony). For 36 hours, the lanky artist will perch, dressed in period costume, atop a coffin. Wodzianski says the piece is an exploration of the kinship he feels to Ishmael from "Moby-Dick," who, at the end of the novel, survives the whale battle by clinging to a coffin.

Wodzianski, whose primary medium is painting, says that he plans to fast -- save for a few snacks tucked into his garments -- for the entire time and that he will remain on the coffin, no matter the elements. He has performed the work once before, in a pond on his father's property, but (e)merge, he says, posed an opportunity to revisit the work in a new context. There's "new symbolism," he says, "built into the fact that this is pretty ludicrous that I'm in a pool of an upscale hotel." But that, he says, is right in keeping with the book's theme of the "folly of man."

Friday through 5 p.m. Saturday in the pool.

'The Huntress'

J.J. McCracken, one of Washington's most prolific performance artists, returns to (e)merge with an immersive work inspired by Anne Royall, a Washington journalist who, in the 1800s, was convicted of being "an uncommon scold." (McCracken's work takes its title from the name of Royall's newspaper.)

McCracken usually creates intricate installation environments for her works entirely by hand, but this time she commissioned a faithful reproduction of a device used against women in historic times. "The whole performance is about being gagged, and freedom of speech, and being a woman," she says. "It's not exactly about [Royall], but it references her quite a lot."

Sunday from 1 to 2 p.m. in the performance area.

'Voces'

Each day at noon, Michigan-based artist Mandy Cano Villalobos will begin the meditative task of plucking plain white blouses from a stack and embroidering the name of a single woman on each. Each shirt, she says, corresponds to one woman who has been killed or disappeared as the result of the violent culture around textile factories in Juarez, Mexico. Because the killings continue, Villalobos sews indefinitely, simply adding and adding to her stack.

She begs off the idea that the work is political. "It's much more about honoring the individuals," the artist says. "When embroidering, I'm commemorating the women."

Daily, beginning at noon on the pool deck.

'Down in the Valley'

"We went from slavery to Jim Crow to oppression to seeing a black man in the highest office in the world, in, like, 400 years," says Sheldon Scott, who says his piece explores the idea that "black America feels like 'job's all done.' You don't get off at the next stop because you feel like you've arrived." If civil rights is a chugging locomotive, he says, gay rights is the next destination.

The work is one of the first conceptual pieces for Scott, a Washington-based actor and writer. It blends spoken word, video and movement.

Saturday from 5:30 to 5:50 p.m. in the performance area.

'Collaborative Karaoke'

New York-based artist David Smith makes experimental rock under the moniker Doom Trumpet, and for (e)merge, he'll ask fairgoers to rock along with his simple, repetitive songs. Smith will be blindfolded and will invite others to join him. "I want them to consider this boundary that we place between performer and audience, and imagine this more permeable space for collaboration between audience members and artists," he says.

"Being in the same creative space as the artist, you're given this insight into the way an artist works, the process, the powerful connection between the artist and audience. It's a kind of demystification of artwork."

Friday from 5:30 to 6:15 p.m. in the performance area.