

IN THE GALLERIES

Striking ceramics a window into nature

BY MARK JENKINS

Natural forms ravel and unravel in fascinating ways in the ceramics of Judit Varga, whose skewed nautilus and warped honeycombs develop in part from her attempts to repurpose rejected pieces. Varga's "Emergents" shares 355 Pod Space — a large Rockville Pike display window curated by nearby VisArts — with Megan Van Wagoner's "Growing Dilemma," which features commonplace vegetables rendered deftly in metal, ceramics and colored glass.

Van Wagoner's representations of nature are more recognizable than Varga's, but still a bit eerie. Recalling childhood weekends in the countryside, the Ohio-bred Marylander ponders what her statement calls "our culture's expectations for food production and land use."

The artist's 3-D vignettes subvert expectations by turning real-life items into mostly realistic sculptures, while tinkering with textures and hues. The food items she replicates, pristine if inedible, include translucent red potatoes and an ear of corn that looks to be solid gold. They're placed alongside simulated pillows, barrels and an anvil, and in front of digitally printed wallpaper of loosely drawn plants and fields, to evoke a near-vanished era of family farms. These agricultural facsimiles are beautifully made, yet their unreality is quietly alarming.

Varga's creations are as funky and mottled as Van Wagoner's glass-works are clean and smooth. The D.C. artist's entirely hand-built ceramics are coiled into knotted tendrils, off-kilter pillars and cocoons that could house outsized insects. Many of the pieces are made of strips of clay that are soft when they're wrapped into curving assemblages that become crusty and craggy after being fired. (Varga learned this technique from her father, who worked in a ceramics factory in their native



WASHINGTON PRINTMAKERS GALLERY

"Red Sky," a woodblock print by Jessie Nebraska Gifford, conveys a sense of fluidity and mutability. The pieces in her retrospective were produced over several decades.

Hungary). Bright colors occasionally intrude, but the earthy palette is dominated by weathered-looking tans, grays and blues.

Many of Varga's sculptures are sparked by organic artifacts she collects on walks. These aren't reproduced literally, and may be combined into curious hybrids that are intentionally damaged and breached. If some of the pieces appear more distressed than earlier works, that may reflect the psychological effects of living through the pandemic. Varga's style is meant "to emphasize the impermanence of life," notes her statement, a theme that was far from theoretical during the past 18 months.

Judit Varga: Emergents and Megan Van Wagoner: Growing



VSARTS

Megan Van Wagoner's "Growing Dilemma" examines what she calls "our culture's expectations for food production and land use."



VSARTS

Judit Varga's "Emergents" exhibit shows the technique she learned from her father, who worked in a ceramics factory in Hungary.

Dilemma Through July 25 at 355 Pod Space, 355 Rockville Pike, Rockville.

BK Adams

Any castoff object that's not locked up or nailed down is potential raw material for the painter-collagist who calls himself BK Adams I Am Art. The resulting assemblages can verge on chaotic, so to integrate his Honfleur Gallery show, the D.C. native employed a characteristically flamboyant ploy: He covered most of the walls with silver tarps and coated the sides of his canvases with bright pigments that reflect on the shiny material. The resulting light show is striking, yet occurs outside the principal artworks of "Outerman vs. Innerman."

The show includes a pair of paint-dappled clogs and one of Adams's trademark stacks of books, seemingly teetering and with titles conceptually revised by text hand-scrawled on the spines. The rest of the show consists of paintings, more or less, an emphasis that might seem conventional by the standards of the artist's previous shows. Yet Adams's anarchic spirit persists. The pictures are mostly abstract, while including some representational bits. Three-dimensional things may be worked into the surface, or overlaid above it: One composition includes some of those adhesive metal numeral plates used to identify addresses, and another is partly hidden under a thick wrapping of twine. The overall effect appears spontaneous, even unfinished, and yet unified. If the inner Adams can merely be glimpsed amid the tumult, his presence is nonetheless strong.

BK Adams I Am Art: Outerman vs. Innerman Through July 24 at Honfleur Gallery, 1241 Good Hope Rd. SE.

From Dusk 'Til Dawn

Shadows serve as a visual link among many of the works in "From Dusk 'Til Dawn," a four-artist show at Brentwood Arts Exchange. In Tim McLoraine's video, a ballerina's movements are dissected into multiple traces that overlay into something resembling a whole. Alex Porter's large drawings of tree branches are so starkly silhouetted that they look a bit like high-contrast photographs. Gayle Friedman, whose entries are the show's most colorful, makes toylike wall pieces that feature looping bandsaw blades that cast curving gray lines on the walls.

Most shadow-oriented are the laser-cut acrylic sculptures of Emily Fussner (whose current solo show at Arlington Arts Center exhibits work in a related but different mode). The translucent plastic sheets are assembled in groups and set at angles to the wall, so they yield multiple patterns that shift with the light and the viewer's perspective. One of Fussner's pieces contains a cutout text that reveals a long-standing inspiration: the desire to trace

the light that entered her sixth-grade classroom.

From Dusk 'Til Dawn Through July 24 at Brentwood Arts Exchange, 3901 Rhode Island Ave., Brentwood.

Jessie Nebraska Gifford

A child of the Great Plains state whose name is part of hers, Jessie Nebraska Gifford depicts such pastoral subjects as flowers and rolling hills. Yet free renderings and unnaturalistic colors transform these everyday things in the woodblocks of the longtime New Yorker, now in her

80s and no longer making prints because of a chronic illness and physical limitations. The pieces in her Washington Printmakers Gallery retrospective, "Carving Color: West to East," were produced over several decades.

One simple landscape, "Overcast," would appear straightforward had Gifford printed it in earthy green, brown and blue. Instead, she employed metallic black, gold and silver. The dominant lines of the more narratively complicated "USA East-West" are turquoise, with accents in yellow and pink. A second version of this picture,

which hops from Manhattan to Midwestern cornfields and beyond, is all in black but reveals another of the artist's gambits: printing from multiple masters and arranging them in an alternative order so they tell a different story. While the ink Gifford applied to paper is permanently affixed, her prints convey an intriguing sense of fluidity and mutability.

Jessie Nebraska Gifford: Carving Color: West to East Through July 25 at Washington Printmakers Gallery, 1641 Wisconsin Ave. NW. style@washpost.com

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