

# The Washington Post

## In the galleries: Multimedia show explores the nuances of Black life

Also: A creative interpretation of Hiroshima and more



An installation view of "Contours of the Interior" at VisArts. (Gregory R. Staley)

Review by Mark Jenkins

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Not every feeling lends itself to street protests. After the outrage that followed George Floyd's murder and so many other injustices against African Americans, the three Black artists in

VisArts's "Contours of the Interior" step back to consider what a gallery note calls "opacity, quiet, withholding and mundanity." The result is one of three intriguing shows at the Rockville venue, where Kei Ito and Emily Francisco are also exhibiting.

While all their work favors black or black-and-white, the methods of the "Interior" artists are otherwise diverse. Lola Ayisha Ogbara makes glazed stoneware in forms that appear both solid and slippery, idiosyncratic and traditional. Sasha-Kay Nicole photographs herself, occasionally with a cohort, in performances that involve covering her head with a black bag. Zakkiyyah Najeebah Dumas-O'Neal evokes "elsewhere" with photographs and videos of watery scenes, and offers a densely layered drawing that features areas of text. (Nicole lives in Jamaica, and the other two are based in Chicago.)

Curated by Gervais Marsh, VisArts's 2023 emerging curator, "Contours of the Interior" is hushed but not entirely quiet. The lapping of gentle surf accompanies a Dumas-O'Neal video, and one of Ogbara's sculptures has a laugh track. The contrast between the two sounds highlights the three artists' emotional range. Their work is personal, but it touches on the universal.



An installation view of "A Dream of Armageddon" by Kei Ito. (Kei Ito)

The central event of Kei Ito's life didn't happen to him. The Tokyo-born Baltimorean's grandfather survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, a cataclysm that haunts his grandson's multimedia installations. The latest is "A Dream of Armageddon," which takes its title from an H.G. Wells story and conjures a foreboding landscape from simple materials and effects.

The floor-level piece consists of 100 small high-contrast photographs of model houses, reversed on black backdrops and placed among a variety of lightbulbs, some of which blink. The pulsing lights complement the pictures, in which the houses are fiery shades of yellow and red, as if reflecting the colors of a nearby conflagration. Viewers may think of Hiroshima, but the piece also evokes other conflagrations, including the burgeoning number of recent wildfires that have turned communities to ash. The gallery is quiet and not uncomfortably warm, but to walk through it is be led into an inferno.

Another plugged-in artwork, Francisco's "The Ocular Harpsichord Revisited," is a discarded old instrument wired to an array of vertical video screens. Pressing the keys yields notes, but certain ones also activate live video of the player. Both aspects of the device are somewhat broken: The harpsichord is battered, and the video is distorted.

As the show's title indicates, this whimsical apparatus is a redesign of an earlier one. Yet the D.C. artist is still exploring the same concerns, among them the nature of time and the role of humans in technological systems. Francisco invented the ocular harpsichord, but its purpose is fulfilled only when a passerby strikes the keys.

***Contours of the Interior, Kei Ito: A Dream of Armageddon and Emily Francisco: The Ocular Harpsichord Revisited*** Francisco through Jan. 14; "Contours" and Ito through Jan. 21 at VisArts, 155 Gibbs St., Rockville. 301-315-8200. [visartscenter.org](http://visartscenter.org)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/art/2024/01/05/art-gallery-shows-dc-area/>