

# Artist skillfully pushes a Renaissance influence to the contemporary edge

BY MARK JENKINS

Fabulist-realist painter Erik Thor Sandberg keeps one foot planted in the 16th century, but recently that remote era shifted forward for him. As the Washington artist worked on "Pillar," the largest new piece in Connersmith's "Construct," his intricate vision of a death-struck village was given new meaning by the coronavirus pandemic. The dancing skull-headed figures that follow the coils of a huge black snake through a circular town suddenly became as timely as the daily infection counts.

Work on "Pillar" began in 2019, but the painting seemed too fraught in 2020 and wasn't completed until this year.

Sandberg has a singular outlook but a well-precedented method. With immaculate craft and precision, he emulates great Renaissance painters. His subjects, frequently nude, have the translucent skin and lushly modeled bodies of Botticelli or Raphael. Yet where such artists illustrated established biblical and mythological narratives, Sandberg devises eclectic scenarios. If some of the imagery of "Pillar" recalls Netherlandish masters Bosch and Bruegel, the setting appears Italian. Sandberg's technique is classical, but his symbols and stories are all his own.

"Construct" comprises seven meticulous and distinctive paintings, five of them new. In three, a woman stands or sits, Atlas-like, at the center of a miniature universe. The village in "Pillar" pivots on a giantess's hips, while "Vacancy" depicts an off-kilter woman covered in unoccupied birdhouses. The birds are in a different picture, "Stable," where they wreath a figure who clutches two snakes, which are viewed with evident alarm by a black cat.

According to his statement, Sandberg sees these three paintings as embodying three possible relationships between the individual and society: overburdened, protected or persevering. As for the



ERIK THOR SANDBERG/CONNERSMITH

inhabitants of the pocket village, the artist calls them symbols not of death, but "of change over time." That's an intriguing moral for a visual parable made by a painter whose style is defiantly, transcendently ageless.

**Erik Thor Sandberg: Construct**  
Through Nov. 30 at Connersmith, 1013 O St. Open by appointment.

## Jason Gubbiotti

Cocooning at his home outside Paris during the pandemic lockdown, Jason Gubbiotti found himself short on supplies and no way to replenish them. That's why the sculptural paintings in the former Washingtonian's "The Travel Section" incorporate such found materials as felt, skateboard grip tape and a wooden wine box. Gubbiotti's show at Civilian Art Projects' current pop-up location demonstrates both his

construction skills and his deconstructionist approach.

Gubbiotti builds each of his paintings in a different format, calling attention to their three-dimensional parts. The surfaces are painted in mostly abstract patterns that resemble imaginary city maps or fictional machine diagrams, and complement such structural features as notches, shelves and windowlike apertures. This selection includes "Holding Pattern," which is mounted perpendicularly to the wall, and "The Mildly High Club," which hangs well above an average person's eye level. Each piece must be encountered on its own terms.

Although Gubbiotti emphasizes the innate qualities of wood and plywood, sometimes leaving their natural tones unaltered, most of the artworks feature areas of fabric or paper. These are often covered with

such candy colors as yellow, red and turquoise, offset by contrasting hues on the edge of the composition or the side of the whole construction. "Florida Painting" etches red horizontals into a yellow expanse flanked by vivid green, while the two-panel "Space Age Relaxation" carves white lines and colored bars into brown fields. The hard-edge gestures echo the architecture of the constructions on which they're painted, creating a sense of an artistic world that's fundamentally in sync while perennially at odds.

**Jason Gubbiotti: The Travel Section**  
Through Nov. 20 at Civilian Art Projects, 1314 21st NW.

## Maryanne Pollock

With the exception of three layered print-drawings that depict flowers and birds, all the pictures in Maryanne Pollock's

Gallery 2112 show are abstract. That doesn't mean "Rebirth the Earth" is disconnected from real-world events. The most recent painting, the starkly monochromatic "Fall of Kabul," channels recent turmoil in Afghanistan into soft gray gestures redolent of smoke. The title piece appears more upbeat, with aquatic blue splashes and spatters dotted with gemlike white orbs. But its original inspiration was Hurricane Maria's 2017 ravaging of Puerto Rico.

The artist divides her time between Washington and New York City and has traveled widely. Her "Transit" is a set of small paintings on paper that were made while on the road. More typical, though, are larger works with black backgrounds that Pollock likens to both soil and a cosmic void. In addition to "Rebirth the Earth," the most striking of these is "Transmitter,"

**Erik Thor Sandberg's bird-filled "Stable," part of his "Construct" show at Connersmith.**

whose spheres, spirals, drips and dots are in silver and copper. Both pictures depict a world that hovers between chaos and order, but the metallic hues of "Transmitter" particularly suggest seeing the universe as a gleaming mechanism.

**Maryanne Pollock: Rebirth the Earth**  
Through Nov. 14 at Gallery 2112, 2112 R St. NW.

## Yumiko Hirokawa

Japanese artist Yumiko Hirokawa lives in New York, but many of the mixed-media paintings in her Watergate Gallery show, "Dear America," were inspired by two events she experienced while in Washington. She was a student at the Corcoran College of Art and Design on 9/11, a shock that became an essential impetus for her art career. In 2017, she witnessed the Women's March, which she depicts in several near-abstract pictures whose subject is immediately apparent. Seas of pink dots punctuated by signs, flags and the occasional photos convey the presence and spirit of that day.

Another series of pictures was inspired by the battered pear tree pulled from the World Trade Center wreckage in October 2001, successfully rehabilitated and ultimately replanted at the site. More personal are two paintings of light on the Potomac River rendered mostly in silver — a pigment Hirokawa's statement says represents "an untarnished world" — and text paintings of English phrases that were new to the artist two decades ago. Stenciled in blue on silver, the simple words "Doors Opening" are a portal to a new life.

**Yumiko Hirokawa: Dear America**  
Through Nov. 13 at Watergate Gallery, 2552 Virginia Ave. NW.  
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