

Art That Works

By Michael O'Sullivan
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ACCORDING to Arlington Arts Center curator Carol Lukitsch, when Andy Moon Wilson was first invited to participate in the center's current exhibition, a celebration of the former schoolhouse's grand reopening after extensive renovation, the then-unemployed Virginia artist's plan was that he would sit in the gallery as a kind of human installation, cranking out 1,000 playing-card-size drawings, which he would pin to the wall as he finished them. Because of repeated construction-related delays of the center's opening -- and several postponements of the show -- by the time "State of the Art: A Mid-Atlantic Regional Overview" opened earlier this month, the impatient artist had already completed 1,250 pieces. Stuck in tiny zip-lock bags and mounted to the wall with pushpins, the untitled installation of alternately cartoony and mandala-like doodles, which wraps around one end of the arts center's upstairs gallery (and sell for five bucks a piece), is one of the hits of the show.

It's also, coincidentally, related to a kind of accidental theme I've identified among the best works in this "overview," which features art from Washington, Maryland, Virginia, Delaware and Pennsylvania artists.

Although Wilson ultimately didn't end up putting himself on display as a kind of artmaking machine, two of my favorite pieces do precisely that. Just to the left after you walk in the front door is Claire Watkins's "Untitled (Parasites)," a suite of small, wall-mounted metal plates behind which slowly moving motorized magnets cause tiny arrays of pins and metal filings to shape-shift before your eyes. Downstairs, Galo Moncayo's "so far, I do not know" does something similar, as live loudspeakers that have been placed on the floor chirp and croak in random sequence, creating not just a kind of weird electronic music, but ever-altering abstract pictures, as the dry blue and green pigment that has been sprinkled over speakers jumps and vibrates with each burp.

Like artist Roxy Paine's mechanized "Paint Dipper" (part of the 2003 "Work Ethic" exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art that created "paintings" without the presence of the artist), or Wim Delvoye's "Cloaca" (another art-machine that came to New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art in 2002 and that was designed to replicate the human digestion system, creating, in the process, artificial feces), the works by these two Virginia artists are not just examples of ingenious engineering and, in a strange way, formal beauty. They're also engaged with a bunch of fascinatingly knotty conceptual issues: Who is the artist when the "art" makes itself? And is the art the machine, the product or the question?

Like Wilson's drawings, Marylander Karin Birch's five gorgeous mixed-media "paintings" (really hybrids of painting, embroidery and stitched beads) bring the notion of artistic labor into the foreground in a way that art -- which, at least historically, has

attempted to erase all evidence of the artist's hand -- typically doesn't. Surely painting, sculpture, even photography, can be a lot of hard work. But there's something about Birch's sewn and beaded abstractions on linen, and the weightless way that the effort of their making insinuates itself into your consciousness, that drives home their function as concrete meditations. *Laborare est orare*, or work is prayer, as the saying goes. Suggestive of loss and longing, Birch's sad and lovely pieces bespeak both the artist's sweat . . . and tears.

As with any group show, especially one with 69 artists, "State of the Art" is hit or miss. Some of the works are not especially interesting, and some suffer from awkward or insufficient lighting in what is generally speaking, a hugely improved exhibition space utilizing three floors.

Painting is well represented, too, with top-notch abstract work by the District's Craig Cahoon, Kevin Kepple and Maggie Michael, and Jerome Hershey of Pennsylvania. Washington painters John Winslow and Isabel Manalo, with Csilla Sadloch of Pennsylvania, hold down the representational fort.

Of the photographers, my favorite is FEAST, a Virginia collective of five artists whose staged examples of deadpan surrealism -- including a snapshotlike picture of a portly security guard checking his teeth in the mirror as his utility-belt-clad canine helper looks patiently off camera -- are certainly the funniest works on view.

And hey, what's wrong with that? All work and no play would make Jack a very dull boy indeed.

STATE OF THE ART: A MID-ATLANTIC REGIONAL OVERVIEW -- *Through March 12 at the Arlington Arts Center, 3550 Wilson Blvd. (Metro: Virginia Square). 202-248-6800. www.arlingtonartscenter.org. Open Tuesday-Saturday 11 to 5. Free.*

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