In the booklet for “Studio Sacrilege,” a reproduction of Amy Hughes Braden’s “Placed on a Pedestal” shows that the piece includes a rendering of a Madonna-and-child icon. But in the collage painting on display at the District of Columbia Arts Center, the baby and most of the mother have been painted over. The latter version might be called the definitive one, but completion isn’t the point of this three-woman show. Perhaps the local artist will stroll in one day and make more changes to the work, or to another one.

Braden’s work is characterized by hot colors, found objects, scrawled slogans and taunts, and areas of representational painting, often of human faces and figures. It fits well with that of D.C.’s Roxana Alger Geffen, whose most traditional picture shows a woman who appears to be bathing but who might be standing in a color field rather than water.

The image’s flatness complements “My Grandmother Might not Approve,” a construction whose fabric, paper and other ingredients are literally layered.

The third artist, Baltimore-born Jackie Milad, is of Egyptian Honduran heritage. She writes that her works on paper “examine the complexities of identity-making for people of mixed race and mixed ethnic backgrounds.” Sinuous black lines echo Arabic calligraphy, while curved shapes resemble natural forms. Milad also paints over her work, notably in “Many Histories,” suggesting the process of revising and reinterpreting the past.

All three artists work boldly, as if unsure not of their own instincts but of the very enshrinement of art. “The work should never be immortalized,” Braden writes, a sentiment that some museum-goers might deem sacrilegious. It seems that these pieces, with their random gestures and ragged areas, are not unfinished, but unfinishable.

Also at DCAC, Rebecca Grace Jones’s “Small Worlds” is a set of tiny paintings. They’re essentially landscapes, often featuring spindly black trees, and prettier than the “Sacrilege” works. Yet process is as equally important to Jones, who made all 18 numbered pictures on the same sheet of paper, and scraped off and painted over parts of them.

Rendered in acrylic and a variety of drawing materials, including charcoal and pencil, the scenes are both rustic and urban. The natural tones can turn metallic, and the view is sometimes interrupted by abstract elements such as the loosely painted red box in “#1898.” More typically, though, the details are subtler and always finely worked and richly layered.

Wijati Soemantoro

Mount Galunggung in West Java, Indonesia, hasn’t experienced a major eruption since 1982, but Wijati Soemantoro hasn’t forgotten its power. The Java native once lived near the volcano, before spending two decades in Ubud, the art center of Bali, and then moving to Virginia. She pays homage to the mountain with “The Ring of Fire,” a cycle of lithographs at the Art League Gallery. Half are in black and white, and the others add colors of earth, magma and flame.

The lithographs are based on drawings and printed with limestone slabs, an appropriate medium for the subject. Tightly patterned areas suggest newly cracked crust and unloosed rocks, sliding as if they were puzzle pieces jumbled by a higher power. Other sections represent more fluid elements, whether lava, water, mud flows or superheated vapor. Those references are apparent yet not explicit. Soemantoro’s style also could be seen as rooted in the purely abstract Indonesian tradition of batik fabric printing. Although they evoke destruction, these handsome prints have a gentle touch.


Robert Novel

Most of the paintings in Robert Novel’s “Translation Not Required” balance three colors, only two of which are produced by pigment. The hard-edged bars, wedges and slashes of the local artist’s show at P Street Gallerie are almost entirely in black and two shades of white, the darker of which is just exposed canvas. This strategy is most evident in a series of six compositions on linen, which is tanner than the canvas Novel uses. The limited palette makes the lone multicolored piece look almost baroque, even though it uses the same stark geometric forms and a narrow range of hues: red, orange and brown.

Novel has a background in sculpture, which may explain his attraction to sleek black shapes. Arranged horizontally, the painter’s stacked, pointed stripes suggest Venetian blinds. Flipped 90 degrees, they look like black-metal stakes, supports for some modernist Stonehenge. Two of the pictures hint at the influence of Mondrian’s lines and planes, but Novel’s style is closer in spirit to that of David Smith, a sculptor who was said to paint with welded metal.

Kyle Bauer

A fairway is not only on a golf course; it also refers to a navigable deep-water channel. The latter meaning is what Kyle Bauer had in mind when he conceived his Flashpoint Gallery show — a series of mixed-media sculptures that outline a course through the white-walled rectangular space. Yet the Baltimore artist doesn’t present a series of dry-docked buoys. His vocabulary comes less from waterways than from furniture and domestic architecture.

“Southern Sun” resembles a flag stand, and “Wall Drawing 1 (Italianate)” is a curving, unpainted plywood vertical that recalls the ornamentation of 19th-century buildings and their contents.

Another piece, which balances a stoneware orb on wooden spindles, looks a bit like a miniaturized water tower. Other pieces are more flamboyant, with brighter colors and metallic streamers. “I break objects down into what I understand to be their purest representational forms,” the artist writes. This somehow resulted in “Miami Vice,” in which oversize Christmas-tree tinsel dangles from fez-shaped scarlet porcelain. Purity is not this construction’s notable quality, but such wild swings off the fairway are kind of fun.


Jenkins is a freelance writer.