

In the galleries: Shiny fantasy worlds, undercut by body parts and company logos

By Mark Jenkins October 1

The veneer of luxury fascinates and repels Jonathan Monaghan. The local artist's computer-animated videos, two of which are in Spagnuolo Gallery's "Mothership," depict gleaming fantasy worlds of space-age vehicles, ornate historical architecture and the sort of decorative items peddled on exclusive shopping streets. But grafted onto these fancy facades are body parts not generally acknowledged in polite society. Sacs, sphincters and such are integral elements of Monaghan's compositions, and their presence suggests the influence of Matthew Barney's "Cremaster" films.

The show is made up of large color prints, black-and-white sketches and videos whose narratives spin in ceaseless loops. (All are produced with commercially available software.) The title piece is more explicit in its representation of a branded universe. Corporate logos abound, and Monaghan comments on both their ubiquity and their blankness: A spaceship carries the erstwhile "AA" insignia of American Airlines alongside one for another "AA" — American Apparel. Logos vary and shift but always promote a cycle of consumption as perpetual as those roundabout video scenarios.

The longer and more recent "Escape Pod" centers on a duty-free shop that would fit a Pixar remake of "2001: A Space Odyssey." Although some of Monaghan's creations incorporate fleshy bits, no full humans appear. Here the protagonist is a deer — mobile as if alive, yet glittering like pure gold. The animal arrives via floating pod, explores the extraterrestrial shopping mall and later reappears, amusingly, in a section of the tale set in what appears to a model upscale apartment in outer space. The deer resembles a piece of jewelry come to life, but it's also one of the few things in "Escape Pod" that doesn't proceed with the stately, lumbering motion of an intergalactic ocean liner. The creature offers the possibility of spontaneity in a programmed cosmos.

That's an illusion, of course. Every 20 minutes, our golden friend will pop out from the exact same hiding place, as reliable as a post-holiday sale.

Mothership: Animation and Digital Prints by Jonathan Monaghan On view through Oct. 16 at Spagnuolo Gallery, Georgetown University, 1221 36th St. NW. 202-687-9206. art.georgetown.edu/galleries.

Public Displays of Privacy

The NSA has nothing to do with “Public Displays of Privacy,” a show of work by four young Washington women at the District of Columbia Arts Center. What’s private in these paintings, photographs and installations is female African American identity, represented both as an idea and by physical attributes.

Two of the paintings in Adrienne Gaither’s “Eye Don’t See Color” series are built from blocks of various flesh tones; in the third, blues and reds bracket solid black-and-white, metaphorical but not literal skin hues. Gaither also furnished a corner of the gallery with items from her home, including books and an African mask. Attached to the wall are Post-it notes scrawled with questions and exhortations.

Danielle Smith’s skillful paintings depict young girls in old-fashioned white dresses and upscale surroundings. In a precise oil, a child hides behind fancy pillows. The artist switches to watercolor for looser renderings of the girls having a pillow fight. The kids are self-portraits of a sort, Smith writes, revealing a privileged black woman’s “feeling of being neither here nor there, belonging but displaced.”

Khadijah Wilson displays two handmade headpieces, connected by a strap and including mouth gags, as well as her photos of female models wearing them. The artist writes that the linked women represent “the self and community,” but some viewers may feel the images evoke subjugation.

There are no faces in Nakeya Brown’s playful photos, which represent black women through their hair and related appliances. Locks are set afire or dunked in a large pot, and a hair dryer takes the place of the receiver on an retro pink phone. The six images here don’t exhaust Brown’s observations on the topic; she has four more hair pictures in Transformer’s “Defy/Define,” a nine-artist show that ponders a wider spectrum of identities.

Public Displays of Privacy On view through Oct. 16 at District of Columbia Arts Center, 2438 18th St. NW. 202-462-7833. dcartscenter.org.

Nicole Salimbene

The white-walled rectangle that is Flashpoint Gallery has been transformed into many things in the past few years. Currently, it’s a combination of workshop and Zen temple, where visitors are encouraged to sit or kneel at low tables and thread needles. The results of this interactive undertaking are not the only stitchery in Nicole Salimbene’s “Mending.” There are also elaborate needle-and-thread installations on the walls and a long tangle of black thread stretched across one of those tables. Most striking visually is a series of primarily white paintings, burned and smoked with matches, whose blackened wounds have been stitched together.

A note explains that Salimbene intends to combine “the art of mindfulness practice” and “the act of threading a single needle” — Buddhism meets what was long considered women’s work. But the D.C. artist also incorporates soil from Santuario de Chimao, a Roman Catholic shrine in New Mexico whose clay supposedly has healing powers. And “Mending” suggests the