

In the galleries: Spins on ‘The Starry Night,’ from critical to cheeky

By Mark Jenkins May 20

Although inspired by places where people go to imbibe as they daub, “Sip and Paint: Van Gogh’s ‘The Starry Night’” isn’t simply a spoof of what organizer Thomas Drymon calls “recreational painting.”

The D.C. Arts Center show is also an exercise in theme-and-variation, and an opportunity for 34 artists to critique a work (and a painter) that has gone from obscure to unavoidable — and maybe even annoying. (In the very long title of her handsome, if not especially radical, reworking, Rachel England calls herself an artist “who doesn’t much care for the original.”)

Unsurprisingly, many of the artists here view “The Starry Night” through the lenses of their own style or experience. Kanchan Balse’s “Takoma Night” melds Van Gogh’s and his own window views. Dave Mordini arrays plastic 3-D prints atop a relief version of the painting carved into fiberboard. Dafna Steinberg’s “Do You Like Art?” puts a small reproduction of the picture behind a series of phone texts with a potential date.

Several of the artists reduce the picture to its stars. Dwayne Butcher paints seven of them in a black field, and Steve Wanna’s scattered black dots represent a map of the stars Van Gogh would have seen when he painted. One of the starkest and most striking contributions is Wayson R. Jones’s near-abstract “Giant Angry Stars,” rendered in grainy black-and-white. Far less minimally, Sondra N. Arkin uses images from the Hubble Telescope to make an intergalactic fantasia no one of Van Gogh’s age could have imagined.

Among the cheekier entries are those of Laura Elkins, who dangles a toilet brush in front of her painting; Kristy Simmons, who turns the famed picture into a sort of 3-D postcard; and Ira Tattleman, who incorporates shards of a “Starry Night” mug. If Van Gogh’s renown is now shatterproof, at least today’s struggling artists can express their frustration by smashing something from the gift shop.