

In the ARTS

At play with the subconscious: Langerman, Marlowe at Gallery Neptune

Bright colors, animals, birds and squiggly shapes mask more serious content in works by artists Elaine Langerman and Willie Marlowe now at Gallery Neptune in Bethesda. It's fair to say that owner/curator Elyse Harrison might favor work like theirs. Her own work falls

**On
VIEW**
by Claudia
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into the same category: using bold colors and strong drawing to create works that lure the viewer with their apparent innocence, only to confront him with imagery that is more complex and not without its dark side.

That duality, an edgy positioning between simple whimsy and Surrealist provocation, is clear in Langerman's art. The balancing trick is not as easy as it may sound. The line between working successfully with toy-like objects and childlike imagery and falling into the cuteness trap is very easy to cross. An artist like Langerman depends on the unexpected connection, the odd juxtaposition of visual materials, to achieve that elusive effect in the viewer that happens when he is looking at art and not, in fact, at toys.

From journal entries, one discovers that in these works Langerman is trying to come to terms with deep feelings about the loss of the perfect innocence of childhood. For her, this refers to the state of wholeness with which babies are endowed: the Edenic moment before the knowledge of good and evil, full of potential, that children perceive only dimly, but can still access in play. Her sorrow as an adult, no longer able to connect directly with that evanescent state of mind, has led her to try to access it through dreams and myths, fairy tales and mysticism, even books, especially "Through the Looking Glass." Such interests become evident in this group of odd little works filling half the gallery space that somehow, like someplace in Wonderland, accommodated



In paintings like "Landscape with Lights" (left), Willie Marlowe reveals dark little worlds of organic forms jostling against each other in deeply colored and textured environments. Elaine Langerman's "BI-RD" (above) shows the juxtaposition of the playful and the gently provocative that is characteristic of her work in this exhibit.

some 200 people on opening night!

Maybe the enticing piece "Atop" that occupies most of the gallery's front window brought them in. Twenty-seven five-inch balls made of paper clay, painted bright red and yellow, are piled into a square shape held together with "red ribbons" of the same medium. "Atop" this structure are little drums, each topped with a figure. Not all are sweet. Among them are a cat-headed human child, a fat elf-like figure, a bird and a cat. They are interchangeable, and like chess game pieces, their arrangement can be manipulated. As such, the viewer can interact with the work both visually and physically. When he does so, he will have succumbed to play: the key that opens the door into that world of imagination we so little frequent in our high-powered workaday world.

Langerman also alludes to issues of time and mortality, themes familiar in the Surrealist vocabulary. For example, in "BI-RD," a small bird

cage, with little yellow paper clay canaries, holds three enormous striped eggs, and a cutout photo of the artist as a young girl holding hands with a cat-headed twin sister. The simultaneous appeal of Langerman's constructions as objects of play, with an underlying seriousness of vaguely disturbing intent, connects them with a long line of precursors—such as Max Ernst or the American artist Joseph Cornell, whose collage boxes exert a similar effect.

Marlowe's art is also Surrealist-based, but in an abstract, biomorphic mode, owing more to artists like Miró and Masson than to the figuration of Dali or Ernst. These are also small-scale works, acrylic on paper, the paint mixed with a gel medium to give them a glossy finish. The work is strong, but Marlowe should consider taking the risk of painting this way on a large scale, maybe 20 times the size of these pieces. As it is, the works are attractive because of their dense and appealing coloration

— deep greens and blues, purples and blacks, with chartreuses and reds on top. They lure the viewer into looking; they beckon the unsuspecting. A closer look reveals dark little worlds of biological forms, of things hidden, of things at their origin. The work is not so laden with psychological content, but carries a great deal of allusion to memory and loss.

Marlowe has said she is interested in "fossils and in the ruins of civilization," things that were once living and whose life is now imaginary. These little images, with their archaeological sense, are landscapes of the mind, reminiscent of what Chilean Surrealist Roberto Matta called "inscapes."

The theme that most attracted me was the biological one, with evolutionary undertones. Marlowe often uses forms that recall mitochondria and cellular objects, as well as other organic forms, both marine and those inside the miniature seas of the human body. The

density of her materials matches the layered density of the references. Works like "Procession at the Bottom of the Sea" and "Caution Lights" are good examples of this imagery in miniature format. Yet, a work like "Phantom Performance" seems a study for a much larger work, something that could sustain a bolder approach. The abstract biomorphs here, edging on figures, seem to need a bigger field to enact their dark theater, despite the decorative effect of the bright color and the technique's sgraffito lines.

Fundamental to Surrealism is an interest in origins, be they biological or psychic. In this exhibit, the viewer is not so much shown these realms, but invited to conjure up his own interior visions of them in response to these seductive, suggestive portals to the subconscious.

"Parallel Color" is at Gallery Neptune, 4808 Auburn Ave., Bethesda, 301-718-0809, through April 2.