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Trawick Prize winners hit the mark

by On View, Claudia Rousseau

The current exhibit of winners and other finalists for the Trawick Prize (The Bethesda Contemporary Art Awards) is, hands down, the best in years.

The exhibit features a breadth and variety of approaches and media, with exciting and intriguing results.

Upon entering the ordered space of the Artery Plaza Gallery, visitors are struck immediately by the complex rhythms of the installation by Mia Feuer, the top prize winner. "The Cairo Tower Collapses/A Fishing Boat in Alexandria is Constructed" was built in the gallery specifically for the exhibition from a collection of media: Styrofoam strips, FGR, fiberglass, latex paint, spray paint, shellac, polyurethane, powdered tire rubber, indigo powder and water from the Nile River.

Eloquent in form and loaded with referential content, Feuer's piece seems kinetic, rising from the gallery floor and twisting its way to the ceiling. The work is a response to the artist's post-revolution experience in Egypt — shortly after Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign from the presidency — which included witnessing the construction of a fishing boat in the ancient port of Alexandria. The Cairo Tower was built in 1961 with money provided by the U.S., and given to then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Feuer kept imagining the tower collapsing, and with it the entire premise of a top-down, artificially constructed Egyptian society, while the fishing boat

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Mia Feuer Top-prize winner Mia Feuer's sculpture "The Cairo Tower ..." is site specific and made for the Trawick exhibit at Artery Plaza. The elaborate structure almost appears kinetic, twisting and morphing its way upward.

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seemed to symbolize the culture rising from its people. Fittingly, the bits that morph into the boat form at the top of the construction are tinted with Egyptian indigo purchased from a Cairo market.

Second-place winner Caryl Burtner's obsessive collections of about 40 years of minutiae of her life are, by their very existence, a kind of micro-history of a certain aspect of American culture.

Her gallery has a series of loose-leaf notebooks, catalogued as though museum archives, of things such as plastic baggies containing annotated lipstick blots, color-coded charts of changing clothes and hairstyles, music and perfumes represented by magazine ads, photos and the like. It's a bit much to take in during a gallery visit, but there's something so remarkably compelling about Burtner's work that it supersedes that problem.

"Friday the 13th" is perhaps easier to navigate as an independent work. Taking up most of the back wall of the gallery, we see a grouping of laser print calendar pages of Friday the 13ths, from 1971 to 2011, with annotations as to the artist's activities on that day. As they are not arranged in chronological order; the 40 years they document are brought together, collapsing the neat sequence of a lifetime into something much more like the intimate experience of memory itself and one's sense of self. The ominous suggestions of Friday the 13th also are erased with the banalities recorded on her calendar.

Ryan Browning took third place with three quirky small-scale paintings. Like Burtner, Browning was a previous finalist, taking the Young Artist Award in 2008. His art has changed since then, focusing on painting more directly — and expressively — in oil on canvas. Although they appear figurative, Browning's paintings do not depict nature, but a dark, mythical or surreal space inhabited by mysterious beings and forms that, although frequently organic-looking, are completely imaginary. His titles, "Maiden," "The Longing" and "Wellness" provide poetic context for the images, but are external to them.

The Young Artist Award for an emerging figure younger than 30 went to Baltimore-based Lu Zhang for her sensitive, elegant but also surreal drawings. Done with pen and ink on paper, Zhang depicts hairpieces and beards, with a wonderful array of delicate lines of varied thickness and tonal backgrounds. They look a bit like shells, but there's something definitely strange about them representing human hair in such exquisite shapes.

Although not prize winners, I very much liked the work of all three photographer finalists. Of them, Adam Davies' large archival inkjet prints were most impressive.

Using a large-format camera that takes 8- by 10-inch highly detailed color negatives, Davies digitally scans them for printing, but does not otherwise manipulate them — something that their odd composite compositions seem to suggest. Instead, Davies looks for the overlooked: the deserted or hidden spaces that provide unexpected views, as he says, places that provide "a portal into a psychic space, both within and beyond the landscape." The results are disorienting, but fascinating.

Sofia Silva's large c-prints of suburban environments are arresting in the way that they focus the viewer on a small detail

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of banal surroundings that we have come to tolerate, and which inevitably express our culture, defining our values, particularly aesthetic ones. By focusing on fractions of the normal, Silva transforms our perception of the commonplace, asking the viewer to take stock of the ways that such things affect us in the everyday.

Michelle Rogers' work features six combinations of three images in single frames. The focus is on vintage post cards from different locations, "bridging the gap between past and present" and creating a link between the anonymous photographers who did the postcards, and her own work, selected from photos taken over a 20-year period.

Presented with each three-photo combination, the viewer is asked to look more deeply for unlikely formal connections, and other details that bring them together. Here, the bowler hat that appears in a number of the photos is hanging on the wall. Vintage postcards with Rogers' curlicued and florid French handwriting are the labels beneath each piece, linking them with the phrase "Le Temps retrouvé" or "time remembered."



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