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## Where Did the Optimism Go?

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Small-Space Exhibitions Include Shows Worth a Careful Viewing

By Jessica Dawson

Special to The Washington Post  
Friday, October 10, 2008

During most of my 10-plus years covering Washington's art scene, gallery-goers effused excitement over the city's ever-expanding creative scene. They talked about how it was coming into its own, how the art scene was on the verge of being something.



At Hemphill, William Christenberry's "House and Car, Near Akron, Alabama, 1985." (By William Christenberry)

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Though we'd have been hard-pressed to define the something we were becoming, it was understood that we'd recognize it once it arrived. For years, optimism was palpable -- as if Washington art aficionados were a troop of first-time bakers ogling a tray of rising muffins.

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It's been a year, perhaps, since I've heard such talk.

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The young collectives don't hold so many groovy parties anymore.

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Now people ask "What happened?" and "What's happening?" with a sigh and a shrug. As in so many aspects of our lives, optimism is out, retraction and retrenchment in. At the Logan Circle commercial gallery nexus, the sobriety of the first fall shows -- traditionally, the high note of any gallery season -- confirms that optimism has departed.

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Happily, a few of the quieter Logan shows reward patient looking. The smallest of venues, [Curator's Office](#), registers one of the fall's strongest shows with collaborative work by the artists Kate McGraw and Ann Tarantino (to Oct. 25). These abstract works on paper look gorgeous, but their smooth-talking surfaces belie a more aggressive conversation taking place underneath. There, the two artists enact the push-pull of relationship through their artmaking.

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You can see what I mean in "No. 64 (after six)," a poster-size piece of cream-colored paper on which McGraw's whirls of graphite (she uses a graphite stick to make these tornadoes of gesture) circle in the background. Then Tarantino came along and laid down a trio of matte black splashes (she blows ink through a straw). Tarantino's forms recall spray paint; their effect is an erasure of the graphite below, forcing it into the background. With their references to abstract expressionism, street art and Asian scrolls, these works offer the right amount of complexity. (And they're relatively cheap, \$750 to \$6,000 a pop.)

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Another strong show hangs at Hemphill.  
Though I groaned upon learning of yet

another [William Christenberry](#) exhibition (to Oct. 25) -- he's been shown, variously, at [Hemphill](#), American University and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in the past few years -- the quality of his vision outweighs his market saturation. Here, proceed to the rear gallery to see his best work.

In back, a gripping 20-photograph series snakes across three gallery walls. The group details the 27-year decline of a rural Alabama home and car in postcard-size pictures.

Christenberry plays with the conventions of filmmaking -- establishing shots, close-ups -- to compel us toward the details of time and place. Eventually, the car disappears and the house collapses onto itself. We're left feeling that Christenberry has told us a gripping story.

At [Adamson](#), the exhibition "Adamson Atelier" confirms what we already knew: that the gallery operates as an arm of its digital print business, without a separate curatorial vision. The current suite of Adamson clientele (to Oct. 25) features some very big names (Chuck Close, Jenny Holzer) in their most accessible form: the digital print. (Yet even these aren't cheap; Close goes for \$30,000, Holzer for \$45,000.)

At [G Fine Art](#), two area artists open the season. Both Ryan Hackett and Cory Oberndorfer (closing tomorrow) are young. Of the two, Oberndorfer seems most comfortable here. Pastel-colored roller-derby girls pop up in works on paper and canvases juxtaposing the tough girls with candy sweets; the result is nostalgic, feminist (sort of) and eye-catching. But these aren't the kind of weighty works we'd expect to open a season. Nor are Hackett's paintings of frogs, fish and bears, which are repetitive in their abstracting approach.

It's a surprise opener for a gallery of G's stature. At the same time, they're cheap and good for the current market (Oberndorfer maxes out at \$6,000, Hackett at \$5,500). We've watched G's ambitious international program wane in recent months, so perhaps the gallery will set its focus locally.

Down 14th Street, at [Irvine Contemporary](#), Teo González presents a group of meticulous abstractions flecked with gold pigment (a better investment, perhaps, than mutual funds), which closes tomorrow. Save for variations of color, you see one and you've seen them all.

South of Irvine on 14th, [Randall Scott's](#) second-floor shop offers London-based photographer Julia Fullerton-Batten (to Oct. 18). She scouts young dancers to appear in her big color pictures; the artist freezes the girls jumping in midair to create uncannily serene images. The girls flutter with books or a violin, suggesting muses of the classical past.

On Florida Avenue, [Conner Contemporary's](#) new 6,500-square-foot megalith has energized the scene. We need big international names showing in this town, and I don't mean the ones we see all the time (Gene Davis at Mateyka, anyone?). We're still feeling the loss of Numark -- and well before that, Manfred Baumgartner. As yet no gallery has taken their place. Now, Conner steps in.

Artist Leo Villareal's LED works are show-stoppers; pieces from the gallery's stable stand out, too (to Nov. 9). Mary Coble's consistent willingness to give herself, physically, to her work, amazes. Here evidence from a performance where the artist had epithets tattooed into her flesh (without ink) comes off as brave and terrifying. Even Mark Bennett, whose work can lean lightweight, presents one of his most detailed works yet: the floor plan of Joan Crawford's home from "Mommie Dearest," which proves as engrossing as a good road map. For Conner and for Washington, this is a promising inaugural.

*Curator's Office, Adamson Gallery, G Fine Art and Hemphill Fine Arts are at 1515 14th St. NW. Irvine Contemporary is at 1412 14th St. NW. Randall Scott Gallery is at 1326 14th St. NW. Conner Contemporary Art is at 1358-60 Florida Ave. NE. Public open hours generally Wednesday through Saturday; check Web sites for exact times.*

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