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In the galleries: A contemplation of circles and attachments

Also: A D.C. artist honors her early years of learning and growth, and a gallery celebrates its anniversary with a retrospective featuring works by 10 African artists

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Review by Mark Jenkins

A perfect circle is iconic, immaculate and a bit dull. It lacks the variety, drama and sense of possibility of the curving lines in the sinuous abstractions of two local artists, Geoff Desobry and Clare Winslow. Their recent works on paper lead the eye in multiple directions, whether spinning around or burrowing inward.

Desobry's Waverly Street Gallery show is in fact titled "Circles," but the energetic black-and-white drawings mostly center on rough ovals, rendered freehand in charcoal. At Glen Echo Park's Park View Gallery, Winslow's "The Art of Attachment" offers elegant prints in which colored ribbons and strings seem to overlap and intersect, and sometimes collide with patterns made by snatches of lace.



The shapes in Desobry's pictures are heavily worked and often result from multiple, nearly concentric loops that partially align. The rounded shapes in the compositions usually stand alone but occasionally appear in threes. They're mostly defined by black lines and contained by fields of gray, whether cleanly applied or exuberantly heathered. Yet the artist sometimes makes effective use of white, leaving areas empty to contrast the fevered charcoal strokes or using black and gray to define an area of white as a luminous halo. The open regions add to the sense that these dense pictures are as much excavated as constructed.

The artist's statement cites psychologist Jan Souman's idea that "little mistakes in the brain add up until the sense of what's straight turns into something round. He says that's why we tend to walk in circles when we are lost." One picture, "Knowing," may not be directly inspired by Souman's remarks, but it's easily seen as depicting brainlike gray matter inside an egg-shaped cranium. Even when it seems to be drawing spontaneously, the hand is guided by the head.

"Any Other Tuesday" by Clare Winslow, included in her show "The Art of Attachment."
(Clare Winslow) (Clare Winslow)

Airier and more colorful than Desobry's drawings, Winslow's screen prints overlay curving bands in ways that can appear either balletic or tangled. The artist achieves this effect by dropping strands of a soft material onto an exposure unit, which uses ultraviolet light to fix an emulsion onto a template for printing. Multiple templates are printed in different colors to build the final image on a white background.

The hues tend toward pastels, but Winslow does employ black. One print enmeshes unfurled gray and black strips with white ones that look to be on top. The illusion of depth is not immersive, but these prints are clearly layered. They both open and block the possible routes to their interiors.

Although Winslow's forms often project over each other, they are not truly entwined. Indeed, the artist sees her "Attachment" prints as illustrating the Buddhist principle of non-attachment. She quotes Zen monk Thích Nhất Hạnh's teaching that, "If, in our heart, we still cling to anything — anger, anxiety, or possessions — we cannot be free." It's not possible, of course, to pull any individual lines out of Winslow's prints. But it's significant that they're merely overlapping, and not actually tethered.

Geoff Desobry: Circles Through March 30 at Waverly Street Gallery, 4600 East-West Highway, Bethesda. waverlystreetgallery.com. 301-951-9441.

February James

An installation view of February James's exhibit "Homecoming (I'm Coming Home)" at Cultural DC Mobile Art Gallery. (Vivian Marie Doering)

After 16 years in Los Angeles, February James has returned to her hometown, a move marked by a show of paintings and sculptures, "Homecoming (I'm Coming Home)." In honor of her childhood, James has outfitted Cultural DC's Mobile Art Gallery to evoke a D.C. school, with a tiled floor and walls that look like blackboards, complete with words and simple drawings rendered in white marks. (One sketch depicts mumbo sauce, a local staple.) The gallery, a repurposed shipping container, is currently positioned so its doorway faces the entrance of the nearby Rubell Museum DC, where several more of James's paintings are on exhibit.

Most of James's artworks depict Black women in a style that is simultaneously nostalgic and eerie; her portraits are usually described as focusing on a person's "essence" over "physicality." A series of white-painted plaster heads attached to rough wooden plinths includes one that's set off by dangling strands of copper disks that suggest both braids and extravagant earrings. A painting of the faces of three women, "I'm Afraid but at Least I'm Living," features ghostly pallors and reddish eyes.

There's nothing glamorous about James's women, which is interesting, since she used to support herself as a showbiz makeup artist. But she does pay close attention to skin tones, which she renders by blending diverse materials, including acrylic, watercolor, oil, ink, pastel and charcoal. The results are both watery and chalky and fascinatingly complex. While her subjects are utterly flat, their flesh is richly textured, hinting at depths of memory and character.

February James: Homecoming (I'm Coming Home) Through March 24 at Cultural DC Mobile Art Gallery, Randall Recreation Center, 820 S. Capitol St. SW. culturaldc.org. 202-204-7800.

Intertwined Narratives

"The Couple" by Camille Tete Azankpo, included in the 10-artist show "Intertwined Narratives." (African Art Beats)

African Art Beats' current show marks the gallery's fifth anniversary, but the organizing principle is not chronological. Instead, the work of eight western African and two Haitian artists is arranged by four themes: spirituality, personal growth, human connection and environmentalism.

The latter category includes some of the most striking works. Gérard Gabayen's "Animal Kingdom I" suggests an animal's head with bold black strokes, which dominate background text in Wolof about the destruction of the forest. Bienvenue Fotso Gunsí's realistic but elegantly stylized paintings depict such plants as trifolium, which some believe has medicinal value.

As a gallery note concedes, sometimes the themes blur into each other. Camille Tété Azankpo's "The Couple" portrays a human connection, but the domestic portrait was assembled from metallic gas canisters cut into shards, a technique with ecological implications. And while Yao Fofó Sewonou's painting of a girl at a piano is listed in the personal-growth section, the girl has the head of a fish, which nudges the picture into a surrealist niche all the artist's own. The stories they tell may be intertwined, but each of the show's contributors reveals a singular voice.

Intertwined Narratives Through March 29 at African Art Beats, 3501 Lowell St. NW. africanartbeats.com. 202-766-2608.