

# In the galleries: The eternal cycles of decay and rebirth

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By Mark Jenkins November 16 at 4:39 PM

The dynamic that links Artemis Herber's paintings and Michelle Dickson's sculptures is that both appear to be coalescing and decomposing simultaneously. The rot may be the first thing that strikes visitors to "Shifting Identities/Humanity and Nature," the Baltimore-area artists' show at the King Street Gallery. But closer inspection reveals remarkable finesse.

Herber paints landscapes on corrugated cardboard that's torn and battered, sometimes by the artist. Perhaps inspired by her own first name, Herber often depicts classical Greece. (One picture depicts the 4th-century B.C. arson of the temple of Artemis.) The once-grand marble edifices look as fragile as the material on which they're painted, reflecting the artist's concern for human civilization in an era of rapid climate change.

Yet Herber is a builder, as well as a destroyer. Many pieces feature multiple strata of cardboard, with molded layers that deepen the image while resembling construction techniques. Herber's sculptural approach, like her painting, is loose and rough. The results are messy, but also intricate and evocative.

The role of nature is more central to Dickson's work, which begins with driftwood and dried vines and branches. To these, the artist appends heads and sometimes partial bodies made of plaster and painted. The likenesses are sketchy in places, vividly realistic in others. Faces seem to be emerging from wood, or perhaps partway through an eternal cycle of transfiguration. Many of the sculptures are in a series called "Neither Mine nor Yours." The title suggests that Dickson — for all her skill — is simply freezing moments in an implacable process of birth and decay.

***Shifting Identities/Humanity and Nature: Artemis Herber and Michelle Dickson Through Nov. 22 at King Street Gallery, Montgomery College, 930 King St., Silver Spring. 240-567-5821.***

## **ARTgineering**

During visits to a contemporary art gallery, it's not unusual to encounter stuff that beeps or glows. Otis Street Arts Project's "ARTgineering," for example, includes Liz Lescault's dangling fabric piece, cloudlike and illuminated from within; Laura Jamroz's clear plastic sculpture of a cat, sitting translucently atop a lighted panel; and Alan Binstock's set of lenses in blue and peach glass, whose tints meld when observed straight-on.

Of the 14 artists, some merely use industrial materials. Diane Szczepaniak's "The Emperor's New Clothes" is an empty space framed by a steel frame and cables, while Maria Josephy's "Eagle Man" is a relief sculpture made of metal found objects attached to granite panels.

Others construct machines, although not necessarily high-tech ones. Roger Cutler's is a hand-powered gadget for tracing the contours of a painting. Steven Jones adapted one of those mechanical rides that used to sit outside suburban supermarkets, so kids can ride a cut of meat rather than a horsie.

The more complicated gizmos offer some sort of disruption. Barry Schmetter connected speakers, a video monitor and other machines so they can be frazzled by an electromagnetic-frequency probe that generates static and motion. Jassie Rios's sound-and-light computer program transforms into music the shadows cast by visitors who step into a designated space. Chris Bohner electronically latches sound to antique locks to recount the history of a pioneering union that represented the devices' makers. If the apparatus is a bit clunky, it's art, not engineering.

***ARTgineering: Beyond the Obvious*** Through Nov. 21 at Otis Street Arts Project, 3706 Otis St., Mount Rainier. 202-550-4634.

## **Al Burts and Billy Colbert**

Lots of people doodle with ballpoint pens, but Al Burts's ballpoint drawings are a little different. Burts is an exceptionally deft portraitist, and many of the works in his Honfleur Gallery show, "Neglected Weed," are rendered on wood. The pictures, which also employ colored pencil, a few dabs of paint and sculptural elements, are far more than sketches on the back of an envelope.

The local artist's education included courses in fashion illustration, whose influence is evident in his precise renderings and attention to sartorial detail. The 3-D elements include necklaces, buttons and an earring, as well as abstract patterns sometimes incised in the wood that surrounds the figures.

Most of Burts's subjects are of African descent and solitary, and gaze forthrightly at the viewer. The exceptions are "Seminole," depicting a single Native American, and "Roots," in which notable figures from African American history surround a young man in a hoodie. That choice of attire is not, of course, a fashion statement.

A few blocks away at Vivid Solutions Gallery, Billy Colbert takes a historical look at African American identity. "The Enduring Projection" includes a large painting that jumbles images in the pop-art manner, but most of the show consists of archival artworks and photographs. Some peddle stereotypes, and a few are brazenly racist. Colbert displays many of these artifacts on the sides of metal barrels, but the most potent 3-D piece is a multilayered model of a Colonial-era mansion. Behind it is a black shadow that represents a legacy of things unsaid, people unseen and wrongs unacknowledged.

***Neglected Weed: Al Burts*** Through Nov. 25 at Honfleur Gallery, 1241 Good Hope Rd. SE. 202-365-8392. [honfleurgallery.com](http://honfleurgallery.com).

**The Enduring Projection: Billy Colbert** Through Nov. 25 at Vivid Solutions Gallery, 2208 Martin Luther King Ave. SE. 202-631-6291. [anacostiaartscenter.com/vivid](http://anacostiaartscenter.com/vivid).

## **The One House Project**

A houseslike wooden structure covered in local artists' tributes to their family histories may not be a full expression of the region's myriad ethnicities. But with more than 220 participants, Touchstone Gallery's "The One House Project" is both massive and impressively diverse.

Each artist was allotted a 12-inch square to recount a bit of family history. The participants include four descendants of Mayflower passengers, including one making his second trip to the new world, as well as the progeny of Native Americans, of Africans forced into slavery and of refugees from post-1776 European cataclysms. The first-generation contributors hail mostly from Latin America, the Middle East and Asia. The pieces are often compelling individually, yet don't quite make a whole. As with many collective gallery shows of Trump Year One, though, the point is less aesthetic than political: A nation of immigrants can never rightfully declare that its home has no more room for newcomers.

***The One House Project*** Through Nov. 25 at Touchstone Gallery, 901 New York Ave. NW. 202-347-2787. [touchstonegallery.com](http://touchstonegallery.com).

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