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Galleries: The Life That Flows From Wood

by Lee Fleming, November 12, 1994

Filling an object with a sense of life is one of a sculptor's most difficult tasks, but George Lorio accomplishes the feat in his show of painted wood sculpture at Addison-Ripley.

Lorio's craftsmanship sets a standard. His flawless black matte surfaces mimic bronze or steel. In "Flame/Water," a small circle, rippled like water in a breeze, supports a flamelike shape. This suspension of natural laws -- water and flame calmly coexisting -- is a visual metaphor for magical transformations.

In "Tree With Snakes," a circle of serpents floats around a slender stylized tree that also hovers in midair. The snakes recall various images: the staff of Aesculapius the healer, the rod of Moses that turns into a serpent, even Christ's crown of thorns. The show's zenith is the floor piece "Another Garden," a semicircle of overlapping snake shapes spread on the floor like lace, and three thicker "snakes" rising at the center of this arrangement. One of the three is a masculine symbol, another is feminine, and the third is a tree, festooned with prickly pears. It's an eerie yet playful new Eden, captured just before another loss of innocence.

This high standard carries to Addison-Ripley's second floor, where Manon Cleary's "Movement Series" is displayed. Here, working with graphite, she creates interiors with nudes -- spaces that are suffused with light and rich with shadows. More remarkable, these figure studies exquisitely evoke the shake of a head or hand in ghostly traces. This gives the effect of multiple exposures, and it works so well because Cleary highlights a single element of these otherwise motionless bodies. In "Movement Series No. 8," for example, she creates a fine tension between the solid back, haunch and breast, and the fractured movement of skeletal fingers.

Behind this figure is a quilted cloth -- the kind used by movers -- suspended over a window to block exterior light. Cleary brilliantly suggests the muffling weight of this material, while lifting its lower edge to reveal a pure glow, as if daylight had overwhelmed such a makeshift curtain.

'3-Deutschland' at DCAC

At the District of Columbia Arts Center, three young German artists -- Rolf Bier, Timo Kahlen and Rainer Splitt -- have turned the gallery into a visual mine field inviting that ultimate question: "What is art?"

Conceptual work like theirs is more interested in ideas than in techniques and materials. These are fourth-generation conceptualists: The 1960s movement has leaped back and forth across the Atlantic several times. Perhaps because this is such well-explored territory, there is nothing startling in most of their pieces. For example, in Bier's "Washington layers (way through)," patriotic red, white and blue blankets cloak the railing around a staircase opening, concealing the structure. This recalls the work of Joseph Beuys and Christo, who pioneered the genre -- but does not add much to it.

Ditto with Splitt, who has removed paint from a section of wall and a length of hardwood floor to reveal evidence of previous "history" -- stains, nicks and underlying structures. The interest resides in the subtle differences in floorboard graining and the outlines where doors and walls once stood. But the questions posed by Splitt's titles -- "What is floor about?" and "What is wall about?" -- are not as interesting as the details of the materials.

Kahlen's work has the greatest sense of irony and wit. In "Young Bags," he positions two electric fans so that their wind forces three brown paper bags up against a wall. The bags tremble like cowering orphans -- an effect the artist acknowledges in his anthropomorphic title.

George Lorio, at Addison-Ripley Gallery, 9 Hillyer Ct. NW, through Dec. 3. \$ 1,400-\$ 8,000.

Manon Cleary: Movement Series, at Addison-Ripley, through Dec. 3. \$ 2,500.

3-Deutschland, at District of Columbia Arts Center, 2438 18th St. NW, through Nov. 24. Prices not available.