IN THE GALLERIES

Connecting modern abstraction with personal identity

BY MARK JENKINS

Since its peak influence, mid-20th-century modern art has in some quarters been rejected, lampooned and even vilified. But its vocabulary is still widely employed, even by artists who question modernism's continuing clout. Five of those painters and collagists are featured in "In Spite of Modernism: Contemporary Art, Abstract Legacies and Identity," an exhibition that departs from the Arlington Arts Center's usual group-show format. Rather than separate the contributors' works, curator Haley Clouser has interspersed them so they complement and amplify each other.

The artists adopt formats and motifs familiar from modernist abstraction, but endow them with meaning connected to personal heritages. Thus Tariku Shiferaw and Paolo Arao, both New Yorkers, make large color-field pieces that draw on their individual backgrounds. Shiferaw arrays bars in shades of brown that represent the skin tones of his native Ethiopia, and Arao makes free-hanging banners modeled on the colorful sails of fishing boats in the Philippines, his country of birth.

The other contributors are U.S.-born, but no less attuned to cultural inheritances. Julia Kwon, a local artist, combines designs in the manner of Josef Albers's "Homage to the Square" series with those of bojagi, Korean fabric traditionally used to wrap gifts. Virginian Asa Jackson's "Urban Planning" combines fabric trimmings from other artists into a sort of demographic patchwork. L.A.'s Esteban Ramón Pérez, who worked at his father's upholstery shop, offers a massive leather collage that incorporates boxing gloves.

That piece, redolent of the boxing ring and the slaughterhouse, is not the only one to invoke violence. One of Shiferaw's sculptural paintings is boarded up and spray-painted like a burned-out storefront. Kwon slashes some of her canvases and wraps human-scale forms to suggest the objectification of Asian women. The artists of "In Spite of Modernism" critique the legacy of their mostly White-male precursors, at least in part, because their rarefied styles were so detached from the struggles of women and people of color.

In Spite of Modernism: Contemporary Art, Abstract Legacies and Identity Through March 26 at the Arlington Arts Center, 3550 Wilson Blvd., Arlington.

DARIO LASAGNI/ARLINGTON ARTS CENTER

Madeline A. Stratton

Like many of us, Madeline A. Stratton spent much of the past two years in relative isolation. While inside, she started thinking about interiors, but not in conventional decorating terms. Instead, she was inspired to build, assemble and tweak domestic and artistic materials into a sort of playhouse, now on display at Hamiltonian Gallery as "We Were Here." The identity of that "we" is unspecified, but Stratton's show looks like a congenial environment for cartoon characters.

Brightly colored, eccentrically shaped and altogether impractical, Stratton's creations include a set of green-and-orange shutters, a wall filled with abstract "reliquaries" and a blocked-off nook with decorative shapes on the wall and the floor. Among the ingredients are glitter, rhinestones, gauzy fabric, found furniture and reflective surfaces. "Useless on a Submarine" is a screen door embellished with a simple drawing sewn in thread.

Among the artist's stated interests is memory, and the profusion of pink in this array suggests recollections of spaces and color schemes from girlhood. But most of "We Were Here" is too fanciful to register as vestiges of real life. Rather than evoking places that were, Stratton conjures things that have never been.

Madeline A. Stratton: We Were Here Through March 19 at Hamiltonian Artists, 1353 U St. NW.

ABOVE: "Black Diamonds and Pearls (Blackalicious)" by Tariku Shiferaw, part of the "In Spite of Modernism" show. The artists adopt formats and motifs familiar from modernist abstraction, but endow them with meaning connected to personal heritages.

RIGHT: "Embodied Disruption V" by Julia Kwon slashes some of her canvases to suggest the objectification of Asian women.

JULIA KWON/ARLINGTON ARTS CENTER

Tim Hyde

The photographs in Tim Hyde's "Night Walks" were made outside, but they often involve peering into something. That might be a shadowy passageway, partly open doors or a window that reveals a lamp that's dim and yet the brightest thing within the frame. This Multiple Exposures show compels visitors to look as hard into the gloom as the D.C. photographer does.

Hyde takes inspiration from "Night Walking: A Nocturnal History of London," British novelist Matthew Beaumont's account of notable writers' wanderings after dark. Hyde's statement notes that he began his evening strolls long ago with his grandfather and that now the treks accentuate his vulnerability: "I can't deny that testing my primal fears is an important part of the nightwalking," he writes.

So a few of Hyde's pictures include murky figures, unknown and thus potentially threatening. One depicts a police-line tape, mostly out of focus yet visible enough to bisect the space dynamically. More often, though, the black-heavy photos focus on sources of illumination — in one case red but usually warm yellows. Hyde's walks may be unusual, but he, like all photographers, is on a quest for special light.

Tim Hyde: Night Walks Through March 19 at Multiple Exposures Gallery, Torpedo Factory, 105 Union St., Alexandria.

Pantone Black

Of the myriad shades of the Black experience, 11:Eleven Gallery's "Pantone Black" presents a half dozen. The show features work by six East Coast artists, several of them pseudonymous, whose concerns are broadly political but also personal.

The American flag is a recurring motif for Xplorefreedom, who collaged one banner from scraps of vintage Black Panther newspapers and rendered another almost entirely in black, with a pair of eyes peering from the upper left quadrant. Mark Clark interjects Black figures into posters of such movies as "Citizen Kane" and "A Clockwork Orange," produced by Hollywood studios that were effectively all White. Equally inspired by pop art is a Marly McFly print-painting in which a segment of a woman's face is framed by hot-pink patterns.

The outlines of her own hips, as glimpsed in MRIs, center Mekia Machine's colorful, near-abstract paintings. Based on photos, Qrcky's paintings transform such scenes as an interlocked mother and child by overlaying them with zebralike stripes. The family connection in Charles Jean-Pierre's collages is that they're made from his late father's paintings, cut and assembled into silhouetted single figures. Like most of these artists, Jean-Pierre chops personal identity into something both individual and collective.

Pantone Black Through March 20 at 11:Eleven gallery, 10 Florida Ave. NW.