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In the galleries: At American University Museum, a world of atmosphere

By Mark Jenkins

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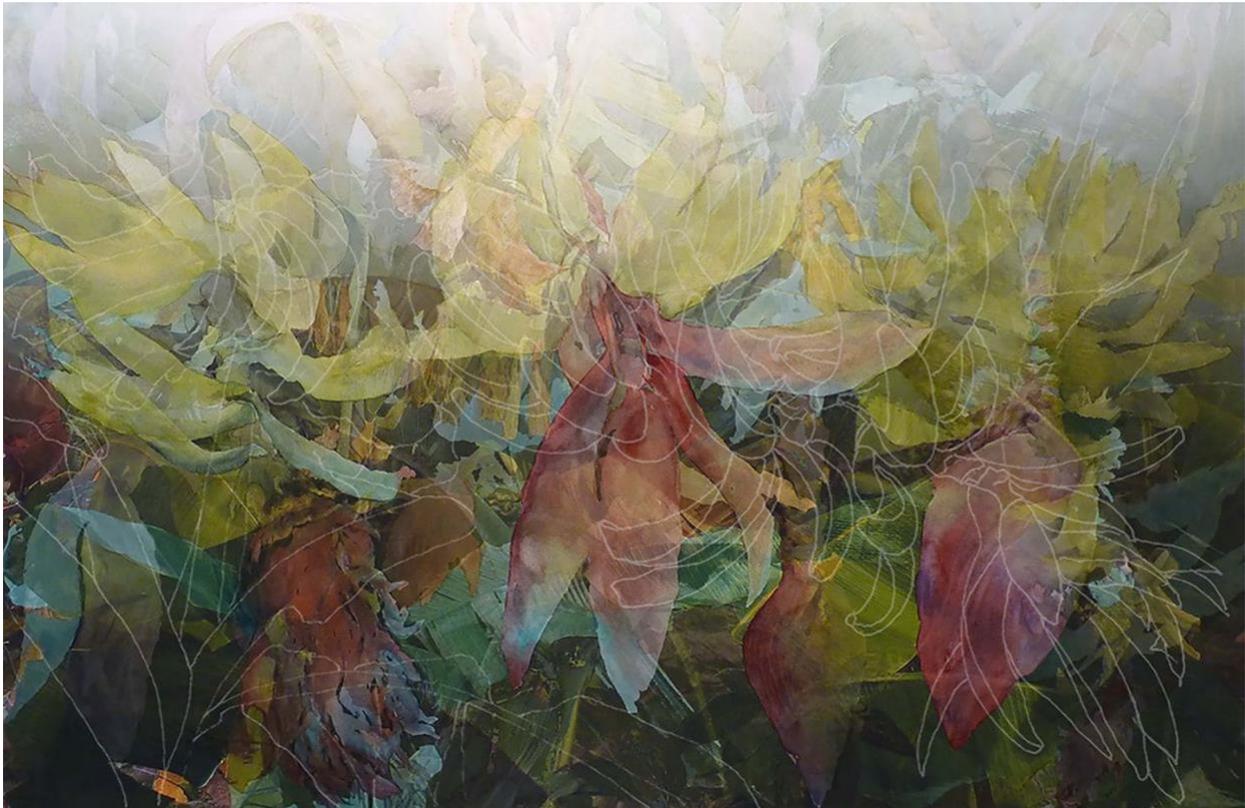


"Girl in Wires" (2016) by Frank Hallam Day. Archival pigment print. (Frank Hallam Day/Addison/Ripley Fine Art)

The atmosphere is humid at the American University Museum, where Christine Neill, Pam Rogers, Lynn Sures and Mel Watkin are showing botanically inspired art. But the show with the most tropical vibe is D.C. photographer Frank Hallam Day's "Dark World," much of it the result of fruitful expeditions to Thailand.

Day's world is dark because he shoots at night to capture mottled skies and dramatic juxtapositions of light and shadow. This selection includes pictures of RVs aglow in the Florida near-jungle and a haunted forest scene with a Buddhist temple illuminated in the distance. The most astonishing pictures are close-ups of Bangkok pay phones, their garish artificial colors tempered by wear and graffiti, and bathed in the neon of nearby signs. Light also diffuses through scratched glass and smudged plastic, yielding pictorial regions of milky mystery. Through one such partition is a blur of yellow umbrella that rhymes visually with the yellow phone on the other side.

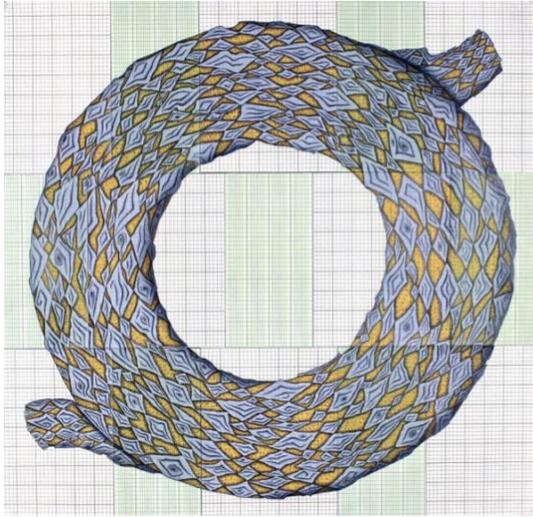
The artist has shown many of these pictures before. “Dark World’s” innovation is to put the booths at the center of complex urban vignettes that stretch across two, three or even six large panels. The show also includes photos from several other series, and features a video of phone-kiosk scenes and a wall of small street-food vignettes. One of those pictures demonstrates that plastic is almost as crucial to Day’s vision as light: He can make a cheap translucent bag appear to be a window to another universe.



“Disappearing Cavendish” (2017) by Christine Neill. Watercolor and archival ink print on paper and framing Plexiglas. (Christine Neill/Photo: John Dean/Courtesy of Goya Contemporary)

In another age, Christine Neill might have spent her career celebrating nature’s beauty. There’s much of that in her “Observations From the Valley Floor,” but these delicate yet vigorous mixed-media pictures also contain intimations of disaster. Among the exemplary pieces are depictions of the fatal bleaching of coral reefs and the damage done by invasive insect species.

Neill combines traditional drawing, printmaking and watercolor painting with contemporary devices and techniques. She often uses Plexiglas to position imagery on multiple levels, and sometimes laser-cuts paper to yield details such as actual perforations in bug-chewed leaves. The precision of the renderings contrasts looser gestures and the lush pileup of overlapping elements. Nature is under attack in Neill’s pictures, but still teeming.



"Cross-Section: Hophornbeam" (2019) by Mel Watkin. Pencil on multiple sheets of graph paper. (Mel Watkin)



"The Children's Hour" (2019) by Pam Rogers. Plant and soil pigments from the Potomac basin, ink, graphite, merlot grapes. (Pam Rogers)

The three female artists in "Topographies of Life" also portray nature without necessarily representing it literally. Pam Rogers employs plant, soil and mineral pigments in ink and pencil drawings that are semiabstract, yet plainly rooted in vegetation. She also incorporates authentic botanical specimens, tied to the pictures or hung amid them. Rogers occasionally uses gold leaf, but the natural elements are her art's precious talismans.

Lynn Sures does realistic colored-pencil drawings of landscapes and archaeological finds, including skulls, bones and hand axes. The style is subtle, with rippling near-parallel lines and a narrow range of hues. The artist makes pictures on paper, but also with paper, composing tableaux with blobs of colored flax and embossed pulp. Blurring image and medium, Sures makes art that fuses with its sources.

Another pencil-pusher, Mel Watkin produces elaborate drawings whose details suggest natural forms but whose spiraling, symmetrical wholes are clearly imaginary. The artist elicits exceptionally bold colors and uses modeling impressively to simulate depth. Adding an ironic other dimension, the looping inventions sprawl across multiple sheets of gridded graph paper. Watkin's engrossing pictures might be called curves against the machine.

Frank Hallam Day: Dark World; Christine Neill: Observations From the Valley Floor; Pam Rogers, Lynn Sures, Mel Watkin: Topographies of Life Through Dec. 15 at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW.