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Strong, Bright, Useful & True Demonstrates the Variety of Baltimore's Art Scene

Running through Sept. 6 at the Irene and Richard Frary Gallery, the exhibit holds up Baltimore as a fertile creative ground for both established and emerging artists.

Review by Stephanie Rudig | May 15, 2025



Kandis Williams, "Annexation Tango," Still, part of *Strong, Bright, Useful & True: Recent Acquisitions and Contemporary Art from Baltimore*

Baltimore is something of a sibling city to D.C., and there's significant cross-pollination between the creative communities in both cities. Last year, the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg Center and its Irene and Richard Frary Gallery opened in downtown D.C. Now a new exhibition demonstrates the strong ties to the university's home city of Baltimore. The Johns Hopkins' Art Collecting Committee, made up of students, alumni, and staff with an assist from BmoreArt's Connect + Collect program, has collected new works by Baltimore-based artists (and several of these selections join with other works from the Johns Hopkins collections) in the exhibit *Strong, Bright, Useful & True: Recent Acquisitions and Contemporary Art from Baltimore*. The artists featured range from internationally recognized luminaries to emerging creatives, and show the breadth of work coming out of the city.

Two wall-size pieces anchor either side of the gallery, imbuing the space with a full spectrum of color. An elliptical array of Linling Lu's signature concentric circle designs are printed on metal, and while the artist typically creates similar designs on round canvases, the sense of color pulsating and the feeling that the forms are in conversation with each other is as arresting as ever. René Treviño paints in acrylic on transparent film panels, rendering images of ruins he's seen while traveling in meticulous detail and Technicolor hues. Looking at these solid objects rendered slightly translucent and vibrantly hints at the labor behind building both structures and art, as well as the porousness of walls and boundaries.

A sense of place, whether that's in Baltimore or beyond, pervades many of the works, often with nature creeping in. In walks around the city, Erin Fostel encounters whole worlds in otherwise unremarkable scenes, as shown in a charcoal and graphite drawing that captures a plant viewed through a window along with the reflection of the world outside. A few of the plant leaves are left blank, calling attention to the unrealness of the tightly constructed scene of shadows and reflections. In photos by Nakeya Brown, the artist invites the viewer into her intimate spaces while keeping them at a distance, showing elements of her routine in images imbued with tenderness and self-preservation. The Atacama Desert in Chile, where high-powered telescopes provide a research ground for scientists, including Johns Hopkins researchers, forms the basis for **Soledad Salame's** multimedia work. Embossing, etching, laser cutting, and embroidery add dimension to the flat landscape in an exquisite display of linework.



Kei Ito "Zen for a Dying Planet"

Materiality and tactility are prominent throughout, and unconventional media are deployed to captivating effect. Kei Ito has created a grid of chemigram prints, made by dripping tree sap and honey onto photographic paper to form an explosion of black and gold. Honey and tree sap were used to treat the burns of Hiroshima survivors, such as Ito's grandfather, and the prints suggest a fight to order chaos. "Basketball Bloom" by Brandon Donahue-Shipp is exactly as the title describes, with pieces of cut-up basketballs overlaid to create the petal effect of a dahlia. Some of the basketball fragments are splashed with ink, the result of a "dribble drawing" event at a Baltimore rec center, where kids make marks on paper with ink-covered balls. Oletha DeVane's sculpture inspired by Haitian Vodou "spirit bottles" encompasses a variety of textures and techniques, including carved pieces of wood, sculpted clay, curved wire protrusions, and elaborate beadwork and sequining.

The centerpiece of the gallery, as in literally located in the center as well as embodying many of the exhibit's throughlines, is a video piece by Kandis Williams filmed partially on the fields that formerly housed the Lorton Reformatory and Virginia State Prisons. A greenscreened dancer, sometimes accompanied by the eerie shadow of another figure blotting them out, passes over the backing landscapes and aerial shots of wildfires, the sequence culminating in an engulfment of flames. It could be a condemnation of the sites where forced labor was performed, or a chance to rise from the ashes.

Strong, Bright, Useful & True: Recent Acquisitions and Contemporary Art from Baltimore runs through Sept. 6 at the Irene and Richard Frary Gallery. Tuesday through Friday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. washingtondc.jhu.edu. Free.