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At the Kreeger, even a Modest Museum Can Contain Great Depths

The Kreeger Museum's 30th anniversary exhibition is a rich reading of its collection with 14 contemporary artists who work in the D.C. area.

Review by Kriston Capps | July 3, 2024



Linn Meyers, "Mirror World," 2022, acrylic ink on panel. (Linn Meyers/Kreeger Museum/Danbi Co.)

My impression of the Kreeger Museum is forever colored by a photograph of a Sam Gilliam painting floating in the museum's backyard pool.

In 1998, the private museum in Foxhall asked the preeminent Washington Color School painter to work on a commission. The invitation was open-ended, but a curator for the museum argued with Gilliam over the direction his installation was taking — so Gilliam chucked the piece into the swimming pool. The artist subsequently built a device to support his free-floating canvas, which idled in the water for the rest of the exhibition.

That photo read to me as an almost literal illustration of the surface tension in so many of the brilliant impressionist paintings collected by patrons Carmen and David Kreeger, who once called the museum building designed by Philip Johnson and Richard Foster their home. The

story spurred me to look past the Kreeger's stuffier trappings — wood paneling, carpeted walls — to find those electric moments.

For its 30th anniversary, the Kreeger Museum asked an independent curator, Kristen Hileman, to assemble a show that reflects the museum. "Here, in This Little Bay" is the result: an exhibition of 14 contemporary artists working in the D.C. region that explores what the museum means, especially how it engages with nature. Her rich read of the collection is a reminder that even a modest museum can contain great depths.

At a glance, a mixed-media installation by Richmond-based artist Monsieur Zohore is an easy riff on a painting in the Kreeger collection. Zohore's "Stervende Overwinning (Dying Victory)" (2024) quotes heavily from Piet Mondrian, the hard-edged painter of jazz and geometry. "Dying Victory" directly references these abstractions as well as Mondrian's early-career natural paintings, such as "Dying Sunflower" (1908), a watercolor that hangs at the Kreeger.

The pairing would be straightforward enough, but instead Zohore, who made his Mondrian montage with materials such as paper towels and bleach, pulls the Kreeger into a contemporary dialogue about art and labor. Another Zohore sculpture in the show, "Primitivism (Plinth)" (2012-2024), looks like a bouquet's worth of bird-of-paradise stems stuck in half-filled Windex bottles, like so many toxic bud vases. It's a not-so-subtle nod to the often invisible labor that supports such exotic pursuits as showcasing art.

In the same library as Zohore's faux flowers is a video installation by Baltimore artist Kristin Putchinski. "Reaping & Sowing" (2023) captures the artist and musician, seen from overhead, as she hunches down inside a piano, tearing the thing apart. It's a caustically funny piece for a museum with its own baby grand and jazz program. Surrounded by the visibly fading titles of the Kreeger's reference library, "Reaping & Sowing" is also a dark meditation on the delta between the artist monograph (final, orderly, canonical) and the artist studio (manic to despairing and everything in between).

Monsieur Zohore, "Primitivism (Plinth)," 2012-2024, fake



flowers and resin in Windex bottles. (Monsieur Zohore/Kreeger Museum)



Drawings by Dolores Zinny shown in "Here, in This Little Bay: Celebrating 30 Years at the Kreeger." (Dolores Zinny/Kreeger Museum/Danbi Co.)

The Kreeger is home to a few dozen cubist and impressionist paintings; Hileman has homed in on the latter. A series of drawings by Baltimore artist Dolores Zinny nods to the work of Claude Monet. Zinny draws tiny squares in pencil that feel enormous. With a bare amount of marks, she packs in the sensation of a much larger natural vista. The relationship with Monet is plain, but Zinny's works are no less dazzling for being direct.



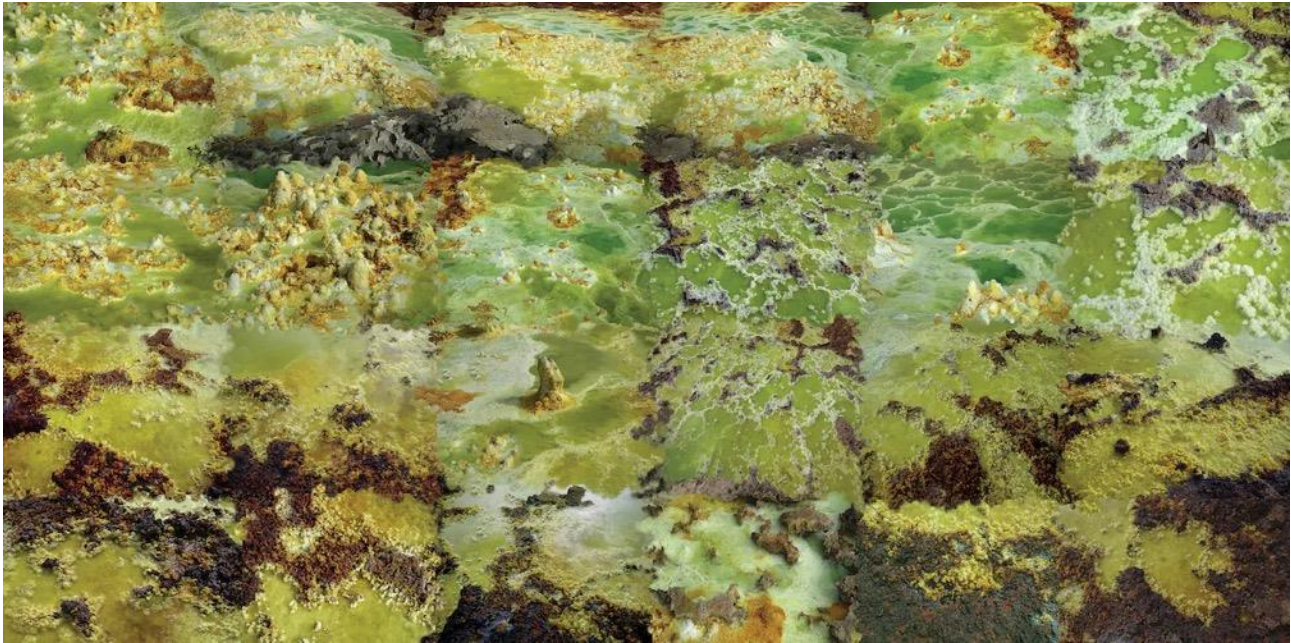
Dolores Zinny, "Trade Winds/Vientos Alisios," 2024, organza, cotton, canvas, acrylic paint. (Dolores Zinny/Kreeger Museum)

"Trade Winds/Vientos Alisios" (2024), a fabric installation by Zinny hanging along a window to an interior courtyard, blends natural light with pigment in sheer sculptural form. "In Silence" (2001-2002), a separate window installation by Baltimore artist Soledad Salamé, activates the interior the same way, with insects encased in resin.



Soledad Salamé, "In Silence," from the "In Silence" series, 2001-2002, resin, insects. (Soledad Salamé/Kreeger Museum/Danbi Co.)

"Here, in This Little Bay" brings together artists from across generations, working in wildly different media, to craft an essay about the Kreeger. It's refreshing to see work by Athena Tacha, an octogenarian Washington artist whose projects trace mathematical patterns in nature; here she's represented by post-minimalist sculptures of volcanoes and drawings of black holes. I would have loved to see one of the Greek artist's shields — heroic aegises, human-scaled, made from such materials as oyster shells and feathers — but her "Singularity" series also showcases the formal inspiration she finds in nature. Quite surprising, in this show, is Jim Sanborn, best known for "Kryptos," the encrypted screen still puzzling operatives at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va. Sanborn's "Analog Projections" series is the opposite of Tacha's work: photographs of hard-light geometric patterns projected onto landscapes from around the world.



Athena Tacha, "Golden Pools (Danakil, Ethiopia)," 2015-2016, chromogenic digital print on metallic photo paper.
(Athena Tacha/Kreeger Museum)

"Here, in This Little Bay" takes its title from "Magna Est Veritas," an 1877 poem by Coventry Patmore. In a statement, Hileman says she memorized the singsong poem as a fifth-grader and over time came to appreciate its many layers. As she writes, the poem touches on "nature and civilization, truth and lies, and the ephemeral and the enduring." That summary could easily serve as a description for Juan Maidagan's "Artefakt-Gebäude 1 (Artifact-Built 1)" (2009) — an undulating cylindrical column the color of polished brass, both a modern object and a golden bough.

It's no small feat to write an essay about an entire museum; harder still to do so not in words but in images, using artworks from outside the collection, works that also need to stand together on their own as a coherent whole. Patmore's poem is Hileman's prism for viewing such Kreeger staples as Eugène Boudin's "On the River Meuse" (1883) or Monet's "Arm of the Seine Near Giverny in the Fog" (1897) — seemingly effortless paintings, nothing splashy, which reveal themselves only over time. To truly see the surface requires diving into the deep end.