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ART

In the galleries: An artist's modern visions of a retro cartoon

Also: A self-described 'Brown American Muslim' explores her heritage, African American artists mix it up with martial arts, foreign-born artists explore the resilience of their cultural experiences



Review by Mark Jenkins

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Seeking an everyman as a focus for his recent paintings, Vonn Cummings Sumner found a cat — or kat, as the word was spelled in George Herriman's 1913-1944 comic strip, "Krazy Kat." Sumner had been introduced to Herriman's work by his teacher, noted painter Wayne Thiebaud, in the 1990s. But it wasn't until 2020 that Sumner began painting Krazy as the bemused observer of dumpster fires both actual and metaphorical. Two years later, the California artist dispatched the cartoon feline into the great outdoors for the paintings in "Second Nature," his latest Morton Fine Art show.

The original Krazy Kat was usually portrayed in a highly stylized version of Arizona's Painted Desert. Sumner's recent paintings place him — or her, as Herriman declined to specify the character's gender — in greener, more naturalistic climes. Krazy's cartoonishness contrasts the realistically rendered grass, trees and sky, as well as animals such as the horse Krazy rides in two paintings that echo Degas equestrian sculptures. There are exceptions to this schema: In a few pictures the backdrops are flattened and streamlined in the manner of Matisse, and the most vivid canvas places a tiny Krazy in the surrealistic presence of a massive orange pumpkin with a red sun on the horizon of a fuchsia sky.

Sumner toys with Krazy's persona, giving him a carrot for a Bugs Bunny-like prop in "What's Up, Kat?" Yet the foreboding of the dumpster-fire paintings seems to have followed Krazy into Eden, where the cat is sometimes trailed by a snake. Perhaps the serpent's undulating shape is just a visual echo of Krazy's tail, which is as jagged as the cartoon lightning bolt that bisects the sky in "Krazy Storm." In Sumner's paintings, the symbols are open to interpretation, as they are in the work of another Herriman fan, [Philip Guston](#). ("Second Nature" was scheduled to overlap the current [Guston retrospective](#) at the National Gallery of Art.) What's clear, though, is that Sumner's Krazy occupies a world that is as uneasy and off-kilter as Herriman's.

Vonn Cummings Sumner: Second Nature Through April 8 at [Morton Fine Art](#), 52 O St. NW, No. 302. Open by appointment.

Beseera Khan

Among the items in Beseera Khan's "Cloak and Dagger" are three shrouds described as "acoustic sound blankets" designed for the artist to wear. These garments, with elaborate filigree around the holes for Khan's head, are exemplary of the Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Gallery show. The artist is never pictured, at least not in full, but is somehow present in every piece.

Khan is a Texas-raised Brooklynite of Indian-Iranian, Afghani and East African heritage, described by her statement as a "feminist" and a "Brown American Muslim." The artist makes photographs that feature cultural artifacts from the Islamic world and designs rugs that are woven in Kashmir but proclaim such American-sounding slogans as "I'm as Good as You Are."

The show's most striking piece is a simulated slice of a Corinthian column, made of insulation foam covered with handmade silk Kashmiri rugs and turned sideways so it resembles a large wheel or a cog in some massive mechanism. Combining East and West, personal and historical, this conceptual sculpture demonstrates the sweep of Khan's autobiographical art.

Beseera Khan: Cloak and Dagger Through April 5 at Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Gallery, Georgetown University, 3535 Prospect St. NW.

Sound Patterns No. 8

According to Honfleur Gallery, its playful current show is “an exploration of martial arts within the Black aesthetic.” That mostly means artworks in the style of movie posters or comic books in which African Americans adopt the stances of kung fu and samurai heroes. But two of the six local artists in “Sound Patterns No. 8” deviate from that approach.

The show was organized by Shaolin Jazz, a D.C. duo that mixes hip-hop and martial arts in events both musical and visual. The selection includes actual posters from such obscure 1970s flicks as “Soul Brothers of Kung Fu” and “Black Samurai,” as well as Maurice James Jr.’s placard for an imaginary movie called “Afro American Samurai,” which includes the title of Akira Kurosawa’s “Seven Samurai” in the original Japanese. Also Japanese inspired, but in the spirit of kawaii (“cute”) rather than samurai, are Imani K. Brown’s manga-inspired paintings.

Kojo Boateng leaves Asia out of the picture in his depictions of combatants in Nigeria’s Dambe style, rendered in the mode of 1970s Afrobeat album covers. Terence Nicholson, the former manager of the gallery and a martial-arts adept, subtracts the pop-culture element with a shadowy video of real kung fu moves. Some but not all of the subjects of Asad “Ultra” Walker’s monochromatic drawings adopt martial poses.

Most amusing are the contributions of Aniekan Udofia, who is best known for his local murals. He bends the show’s premise by portraying female warriors outfitted with weapons from his own trade: giant pencils. His exquisitely detailed paintings wittily hint that artists are the greatest heroes.

Sound Patterns No. 8 Through April 8 at Honfleur Gallery, 1241 Good Hope Rd. SE.

Frequent Goodbyes

The five contributors to “Frequent Goodbyes” are foreign-born artists who ponder their cultural identities in diverse ways. Their work was convened at H-Space by Sandy Cheng, who’s foreign-born herself. Originally from Taiwan and now a Washingtonian, Cheng is working toward an MFA in curatorial practice from the Maryland Institute College of Art.

Most of the artists live in D.C. or Baltimore but came to their current homes by circuitous paths. In her intentionally choppy internet-sourced video, Seoul native Cecilia Kim uses Google Maps to chart her time in Korea, Britain and the United States. Born in Ecuador to Chinese parents, Cecile Chong makes antique-feeling encaustic paintings that combine lost-childhood images of both Asian and Western children. Originally from Nigeria, Gabriel C. Amadi-Emina produces photo montages, mostly black-and-white and sometimes ominous, that feature gleaming bodies and traditional African masks and weapons.

Samia Bzioui evokes her Moroccan roots, international migration and an in-between sensibility with a midair piece comprising a bundle of cotton hanging on a pole lettered with Arabic text. Chintia Kirana, who was born in Jakarta and is of Chinese ancestry, offers the most abstract work: precise geometric drawings that contrast thin lines with thick blocks and the austere blackness of both with shiny metallic leaf. These artworks don't evoke any particular location yet have a strong sense of place.

Frequent Goodbyes *Through April 6 at H-Space, 1932 Ninth St. NW (entrance at 1917 9½ St. NW).*