

Going Out Guide

(e)merge art fair at the Capitol Skyline Hotel

By **Michael O'Sullivan** October 2, 2014

The (e)merge art fair opened Thursday night with a poolside party and preview at the Capitol Skyline Hotel. But the fourth annual edition of Washington's only homegrown art fair — a sort of mini Comic Con for the culturati — gets underway in earnest Friday at noon.

Visitors to the fair, which runs through Sunday, can expect much the same flavor of offerings as last year: work by up-and-coming artists, with an emphasis on performance and digital art. That's according to co-founder Jamie Smith, who started (e)merge in 2011 with Leigh Conner, her partner in Connorsmith Gallery.

Smith and Conner have made one small change this year. For the first time, several galleries will showcase their wares on the hotel's main floor. That's in addition to the second floor, where the bulk of the fair's dealers have traditionally set up shop in the hotel's guest rooms, using every inch of space (including, in some cases, beds, bathrooms and dresser drawers). It makes for a funky, informal way to see a lot of art in a limited time. Scattered throughout the rest of the hotel — including the parking garage and the poolside courtyard — you'll find work by more than 50 artists, selected by a vetting committee that included dissident [Chinese artist Ai Weiwei](#).

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Among those artists are such genre-busters as Andrey Ustinov and Stephen Hendee. Ustinov, a Russian artist based in Germany, won't be attending (e)merge, but he will be present in spirit, or at least digitally. Smith was hopeful that this would mean a live performance, streamed over the Internet, but the details were still being ironed out this week.

Hendee, a Baltimore artist, will be at the fair with “A Democracy of Averages,” a mixed bag of sound art, all staged inside a structure resembling a baseball backstop covered in reflective Mylar. The program, which includes compositions by Hendee, David Sanchez Burr, Carrie Fucile, Cecilia Vidal and Allison Yasukawa, will take place Saturday evening by the pool.

Here are other artists worth noting:

MAKING A DEBUT

True to its name, (e)merge has earned a reputation for introducing Washington to unknown talent. One such newcomer is Becky Borlan, a recent transplant from Boston to Takoma Park. She quit her day job this spring — as an arts project manager, overseeing other artists' work — to focus on her own sculpture. At the fair, Borlan will present a site-specific installation inspired by the hotel's mid-century modernist architecture by Morris Lapidus.

Referencing Lapidus's flair for visual excess, Borlan's work, suspended from the poolside facade, will incorporate a cascade of colorful plastic balls, the sort you might find in an Ikea ball pit. The work — called “Too Much Is Never Enough,” after the title

of Lapidus’s autobiography — is meant to be fun, not heavy, Borlan says. “I think [Lapidus] really, really believed that phrase,” she says. “He gilded the lily, and then he added another bouquet.”

MAKING A SQUAWK

A little topicality is never out of place at (e)merge. James Bernard Cole’s performance, “That Corcoran Status,” makes hay of the recent takeover of the artist’s alma mater, the Corcoran College of Art and Design, by George Washington University.

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Cole, who graduated this spring, will turn the Capitol Skyline pool into a duck pond, with floating decoys and a duck blind nearby. For the performance, which will be repeated throughout the fair, Cole and an accomplice will play hunters, dressing in GWU paraphernalia and blowing duck calls in an attempt to lure what the artist calls the Corcoran’s “sitting ducks” — i.e., its faculty, staff and students — to their slaughter.

Subtle it isn’t. But Cole doesn’t care. “If I ruffle some feathers — pun intended — sometimes you’ve got to do that,” he says.

MAKING A CONNECTION

You’ll find Karine Falleni’s “Continuance” — along with Falleni herself — in a corner of the lobby. That’s another hallmark of (e)merge: It’s an artistic meet-and-greet.

Created with pinstriping tape — a flexible material used in customizing automobiles — “Continuance” will take shape on the lobby’s ceiling and walls over the course of the fair. Part drawing, part sculptural installation and part performance, the New York artist’s piece will evolve and take on additional layers as she works on its gently curving contours.

Falleni, whose drawings also have taken the more traditional form of graphite on paper (and sometimes looping string), says there’s nothing particularly precious or intimidating about her temporary tape installations.

“I love the engagement of people touching my work,” she says. “It’s supposed to feel inviting. No one should be going, ‘Be careful, don’t break it.’”

MAKING A RETURN

Visitors to last year’s fair may remember Lavar Munroe, whose bedding-like sculptures were fashioned from soiled cardboard that the artist had scavenged from homeless encampments. Those works were among the most powerful objects on view in the hotel’s parking garage.

Munroe is back this year, this time under the auspices of Nomad Gallery, a Belgian art dealership. Nomad will showcase a suite of Munroe’s mixed-media drawings and sculptures, part of an installation touching on themes of the hero, violence, crime and punishment.

Titled “The Footprints Go This Way and Then They Return,” Munroe’s newest work promises to be, like last year’s cardboard beds, both darkly disturbing and deeply beautiful.

MAKING A POINT

The racial subtext of Sheldon Scott's art is subtle. For instance, not many people may know that Brazil nuts — of which the artist is using 200 to 300 pounds in his (e)merge installation — used to be widely known by a slang term incorporating the n-word. Or that the same racist slur is part of the original lyrics of a popular ditty more universally known as the [ice cream truck song](#).

Scott's work, "Folk' Lore," which features sculpture, performance and sound installation, alludes to these and other buried histories. (The phrase "eeny meeny miny mo" — a nonsense jingle with a racist history — is spelled out in neon.) But Scott, whose work was recently featured at the Arlington Arts Center's "Reprise" exhibition, doesn't hit you over the head with his messages, even though his work at (e)merge will feature an actual sledgehammer, which the artist will use to drive nails, a la the legend of "steel-driving man" John Henry.

MAKING COPIES

Mercedes Teixido is giving away her art. The California artist will be on site throughout the fair, creating a series of what she calls identical "twin" drawings, using a mechanical copying machine known as a polygraph, among whose early fans was Thomas Jefferson.

The device's armature allows Teixido to create a duplicate of whatever image she puts her pen to. For her performance, "Notes for the Capitol," the artist will invite fair visitors to read aloud from one of several Washington-themed texts, which Teixido will then use to inspire her art work(s). When finished, she'll keep one drawing and give the other to the reader.

Teixido's performance — so antithetical to the way things normally work, both in the art world and in political Washington — is refreshing. It's part of what she calls the "culture of generosity."

If you go

The (e)merge art fair takes place Friday and Saturday from noon to 7 p.m. and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. at the [Capitol Skyline Hotel](#), 10 I St. SW (Metro: Waterfront or Navy Yard). 202-488-7500. For a full schedule of performances and programming, visit www.emergeartfair.com.

Admission is \$15, \$10 for students, seniors and members of groups of 10 or more. On Friday from noon to 3 p.m., students will be admitted free.

Born and raised in Washington, D.C., Michael O’Sullivan has worked since 1993 at The Washington Post, where he covers art, film and other forms of popular – and unpopular – culture.

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