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Democracy Dies in Darkness

GALLERIES

FROM RUSSIA, WITH LOVE

June 18, 1993

By Janet Wilson

After three years in St. Petersburg, Russia, Robin Purnell has mined that experience to create an impressive group of portraits and genre scenes. Working in a traditional realist style, the Virginia-based artist approaches her subjects with an awesome battery of technical skills. But there's more to the Mahler Gallery's "Portraits and Genre Scenes From St. Petersburg, Russia" than just meticulously rendered detail or an assured handling of egg tempera and oil paint. Purnell has made a vital emotional connection with these people that has enabled her to go beyond merely catching a likeness. And she has done so at a time of great change in Russia, which is subtly conveyed in much of her work.

With the exception of a charming portrait of a "Russian Boy, Age 11," her subjects are mostly elderly women. Wearing babushkas, they go about their business as ever, selling flowers and vegetables or enjoying the company of friends. But much has changed. In "Baba Yaga and Her Cohorts," the viewer notes a prayer stand with a picture of the Virgin and Child, now openly displayed in a courtyard. Religious symbols abound in these paintings, particularly the fish -- emblem of Christ, "fisher of souls," and of St. Peter. For the artist, the stolid women -- some dressed in colorful native costumes -- appear to represent the key to reviving a religious and cultural heritage long suppressed.

Purnell's realism is capable of making room for some almost surreal effects, such as the huge, improbably placed fish in "Russian Women in Winter." And at times a flatness of the picture plane departs from the practice of the old masters, but the lessons she has learned from them are what make her work memorable.

Dale Zuehlke at Henri

In 1966 sculptor Dale Zuehlke had her first solo exhibition at Henri Gallery. She was then just out of Bennington College, where she had studied with Anthony Caro and David Smith. Photographs of Zuehlke's work from that highly praised show -- large-scale welded steel sculptures colorfully painted -- reveal not surprisingly the strong influence of her two eminent teachers.

Zuehlke's current show at Henri (her first here since 1966) indicates that she is still committed to forms culled from a geometric vocabulary and placed at the service of color. But the artist has developed her own whimsical style that often seems like a sendup of the pretensions of high art while remaining committed to its craftsmanship. There's an exuberant Tinker Toy quality to works like "Over the Top" and "Second Rung" that keeps good company with the artist's skillfully balanced forms.

Most of these welded steel pieces are no more than 44 inches high. Each is painted with a high-gloss enamel that gives it an appealing reflective sheen, so that the play of light becomes an essential element of the work. With the exception of the all-black "Moon Pie," each sculpture is composed of simple geometric forms in a rainbow of mostly primary colors, often played off against gleaming black elements.

Zuehlke's quirky sense of humor comes to the fore in several works with a strong anthropomorphic quality. The artist now lives in Wisconsin, no doubt partly the inspiration for her "Big Cheese." But Washington has no shortage of the type served up in this work, which transforms the central circular shape into an inflated talking head. Tune in any Sunday morning for the real thing.

Afaf Zurayk at Foundry

"As a child I lived in a house with no doors," writes Afaf Zurayk in a poem accompanying her exhibition of small works on paper at Foundry Gallery. The house was in Beirut, and it provides the landscape of memories for her series "Dream Doors," rendered in ink, crayon and watercolor. Zurayk, who has lived in Washington since 1983, traces the difficult journey between two worlds in an array of tiny, often cryptic images that fill each work. Omnipresent black keyholes doom the dream of a "house with no doors," replacing it with a sense of alienation. Hovering in the midst of these spidery line drawings is a solitary figure outlined in black ink. Zurayk's skillful manipulation of china ink over large areas of the paper helps convey the mood of these works but leads her away from her greatest strength as an artist. "Recollections," her series of 18 small works, is a striking display of her considerable ability as a colorist. In each of these pieces, an oval face is almost imperceptible beneath a blizzard of multicolored gestural strokes in chalk and oil pastels and black ink. The mood is somewhat more somber in this series, conveying the artist's inner struggles. But out of that darkness, Zurayk's brilliant color bears witness to the brighter hope of tomorrow.

Robin Purnell, at Mahler, 406 Seventh St. NW, to July 17.

Dale Zuehlke, at Henri, 1500 21st St. NW, to July 13.

Afaf Zurayk, at Foundry, 9 Hillyer Ct. NW, to June 27.

