

# WASHINGTON CITY PAPER

## "Washington Art Matters II," Reviewed

JOHN ANDERSON

MAR 14, 2014 11 AM



The first “Washington Art Matters” exhibit, mounted last summer, was an incomplete thought: a colon, desperate for an exclamation point. Though there were several remarkable works in the exhibition at the American University Museum—a 90-artist show assembled in less than two months by a skeleton crew and a shoe-string budget—something was missing. Perhaps the digital suggestion box offered by the museum helped curators fill in the blanks. “Washington Art Matters II: 1940s to 1980s,” which closes this weekend, is a sequel that was worth making.

This time, of the 99 works displayed, only 19 predate 1970, creating an unmistakable focus on two decades that—at a glance—focus on a wide array of artistic approaches. However, free from the ballyhoo of Washington Color School that dominated the first “Washington Art Matters” show, this

selection of works highlights an academic struggle to define what Washington art is, with roughly half of the artists firmly entrenched in the varied forms of abstraction and the other half engaged in representational forms. One wall in the central ellipse of the first floor gallery crystalizes this argument, presenting six large paintings salon-style, each elbowing for room. **Ann Purcell**'s swatches of fabric and paint on a black field, **Patrick Craig**'s tightly rendered geometric shapes, and **Patrice Kehoe**'s impastoed and symbolic gestures compete with **Alan Sonneman**'s nearly photorepresentational nude swimmer, nearly abstracted by the rippled water, **John Winsolw**'s airy palette depicts three children in a room, and **William Woodward**'s loose brush strokes capture one woman helping a second into a kimono.

The argument is not consistently observed throughout the first-floor galleries of the museum. And there are outliers that can't be neatly classified as abstraction or representation. **Tom Ashcraft**'s "The Fastest Stick on Earth," a stick mounted on wheels, compiled with photographic and video evidence of its launch on a day in 1981, delves cleverly into the absurd. **Nizette Brennan**'s "Madonna Table," carved from Pietra Serena stone, has Surrealist connotations, with plenty of phallic and vaginal qualities, adjacent to a memento mori constructed from an upended finger bowl and piles of stones. And then there is the camp of **Sidney Lawrence**'s "Self-Portrait with Swelled Head" that is at once iconic and reminiscent of **Red Grooms**.

The two exhibits hinge around the book *Washington Art Matters: Art Life in the Capital 1940-90*, a (mostly) teeth-grinding read that's chock full of notes, pictures, and 41 pages of **Gene Davis** references. While the book makes the incoherent and implausible argument that D.C. should be seen as on par with New York, the two exhibits make clear that D.C.'s identity is all its own. More fittingly, the exhibits have indicated a need for a museum in Washington that emphasizes Washington art. For almost a decade, the de facto museum of D.C. art has been at American University, with museum director **Jack Rasmussen** balancing exhibitions of Washington artists with student exhibitions and national and international shows. Although nearly 200 artists have been featured between the two halves of "Washington Art Matters," by Rasmussen's estimation he's had to omit another 200 deserving artists. And that's just artists who worked before 1990. Twenty-five years have passed since. The case has been made: Washington art does matter. All we need is the wall space to display it.