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Home-grown artists gain footholds

by Mark Jenkins

“Local Color” is a natural title for a survey of neighborhood artists, but Gallery plan b’s current exhibition takes the phrase literally. The exhibition features hot hues - the top local color, it seems, is red - and views that will be recognizable to most Washingtonians. Local? Most of the scenes depicted in these paintings, photographs and prints are within walking distance of the gallery, at 14th and Q streets NW. Included are visions of the Capitol and the Washington Monument, as well as buildings that are almost as iconic in hometown-D.C. circles: Ben’s Chili Bowl, Barrel House Liquor and the Wonder Bread factory.

Decorative but hip, most of this work seems designed for the walls of the latest crop of condos being planned along 14th and U streets. Indeed, one of the artists, Charlie Gaynor, is a photographer who doubles as a real estate agent. His images of vivid graffiti and weathered facades may alienate some potential apartment buyers, but they depict the sort of urban texture that appeals to other would-be inner-city residents.

The paintings range from Ron Donoughe’s straightforward, mildly impressionistic views of Logan Circle landmarks to Joey P. Manlapaz’s large canvases of street scenes, which focus on such inanimate inhabitants as vending machines and newspaper boxes, as well as a threatened breed: pay phones. Steven Stichter’s woodblock prints and Isabelle Spicer’s small paintings observe the same general territory.

Photographer David Ballinger depicts some of the city’s best-known buildings, but his approach is to multiply and abstract them: His Capitol and White House are twinned and flipped to negatives, imbuing them with a ghostly quality that doesn’t quite overcome the images’ picture-postcard quality. The

splashed with the red, blue and yellow dots long seen on the brand’s bags.

Crossett’s work is the group’s densest and most interesting. His use of primary colors and photo-transfer technology recall such 1960s pop artists



closest thing to a first-person piece is also a streetscape: David J. Kalamar’s “Self Portrait” is a painting of a photograph that includes the artist’s shadow in the foreground.

Although Gaynor’s pictures are heavy on crimson, they’re topped by Luis Gomez’s redder-than-thou photos, which feature a skateboard logo, band jackets and a wig, all in shades of scarlet. Wonder Bread contributes to the riot of color. One of Gaynor’s photos contrasts the abandoned factory’s red sign with the weathered tones of the building’s facade. Michael D. Crossett’s prints include a black-and-white look at the same structure, cleverly

as Andy Warhol, while his montaged images suggest Robert Rauschenberg. He even invokes the third member of that troika, Jasper Johns, by superimposing a target on some of his prints. Yet Crossett’s style is tidier than that of those precursors, and it’s not surprising to learn that he has a degree in marketing and advertising. The art currently at plan b may be more “downtown” than Zenith’s, but it’s no edgier.

Michael Crossett’s Distr1ct AM Delivery” an acrylic screenprint on canvas is pictured above.