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## The Washington Post

# In the galleries: A rock-and-roll odyssey through sex, race and religion

By Mark Jeins

Today at 6:00 a.m. EST



Little Richard, pioneering rock-and-roller, self-described “omnisexual” and off-and-on Christian preacher, is the patron saint of VisArts’s “Keep A-Knockin.’” Named for Richard’s 1957 hit, the ambitious nine-artist show explores what curator Joshua Gamma calls “the complicated inheritance of rebellious American Protestantism.” That includes religious prophecy, conflicted sexuality, and gospel, rock and soul music.

The show’s oldest testament is “Rock My Religion,” a 55-minute sound-and-image montage made in 1983-1984 by video-art pioneer Dan Graham; its cutup account progresses from the Shakers to James Dean to Patti Smith, all in clips and still images whose resolution is so low that the scraps look like the A/V equivalent of tattered Dead Sea Scrolls. The other pieces, from 2013 or later, include drawings, banners and installations, and another video: Jimmy Joe Roche and Allen Cordell’s sermon on the evils of the Internet, delivered from an industrial pulpit.

Kyle Kogut’s ink-and-pencil renderings have updated the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse so they look like chrome automobile insignia. SM Prescott’s tapestries use terms from Christian hymns and liturgy to exalt trans people, sex workers, drug users and others who are not always welcome at church. Rodrigo Carazas Portal combines degraded silk-screen and video images of pop-culture messiah Elvis Presley, a symbol of the United States for the Peru-raised artist.

Religious and secular objects mingle in installations by Babizulu and Brian Dinkel and by Omolará Williams McCallister. The duo's piece is a sort of altar that features a TV set and, via headphones, a gospel-derived slow jam. Williams McCallister's "Fishers of Men" turns aluminum livestock tanks into baptismal fonts while invoking the story in which Jesus recruits his first disciples. "I will make you fishers of men" is inscribed on the side of a tank, mingling sacred and everyday in a manner, this show suggests, that is specifically American.

Also at VisArts are a pair of quieter exhibitions, Noah Breuer's "Cabbage" and Jonna McKone's "Slow Drift."

Breuer's show takes its name from the garment-industry term for leftover bits of cloth. His designs come from the archives of his Czech Jewish family, who had a textile business before World War II destroyed it and many of Breuer's relatives were killed. The Alabama-based artist remakes traditional decorative motifs in unexpected media, rendering fabric patterns in 3-D form as cast cotton paper or kiln-formed glass. An example of the glass is "Swan Swatches," which evokes the softness of cloth in a substance as durable as a family's legacy.

McKone's "Slow Drift" comprises mostly photographs of Maryland landscapes, a series that began with pictures of former tobacco farms. Some of the Baltimore artist's images have documentary interest, but most are primarily studies in light and shadow: Sunlight pools amid forests, filters through trees and glints off a metallic musical instrument that appears to be lying in the woods. McKone includes a few chemigrams, direct exposures made without a camera. These focus on smaller elements of the scenery while emphasizing the delicacy of the natural world.

***Keep A-Knockin'; Noah Breuer: Cabbage; and Jonna McKone: Slow Drift Through Jan. 2 at VisArts, 155 Gibbs St., Rockville.***

# Timothy Makepeace

The launch of the James Webb Space Telescope — scheduled for Dec. 24 at the time of this writing — should lead to stunning images of the cosmos. But what of the device itself, which was partly assembled at Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland? Timothy Makepeace painstakingly depicts the high-tech marvel in “Reflections on a Tool of Observation: Artwork Inspired by the James Webb Space Telescope” at the National Academy of Sciences.

Makepeace was one of several artists selected by NASA to document the telescope before its deployment to a planned orbit almost 1 million miles from Earth. The D.C. resident worked from photographs, mostly his own, to draw realistic but not overly technical close-ups of the device. His statement notes that he enjoys “the counterintuitive idea . . . of using a very imprecise medium, like soft charcoal, to render the image of one of the most technically advanced and precise objects ever devised and constructed by mankind.”

Some of the drawings also employ ink and paint, and many feature yellow pastel to simulate the telescope’s gold-plated surfaces designed to reflect infrared light. Makepeace has a background as a sculptor, and he uses gradated color deftly to suggest curving, 3-D forms and the play of light across the telescope’s complex components. (One illustration is titled “Primary Mirror Reflecting Secondary Mirror Reflecting Primary Mirror.”) The Webb telescope will soon be phenomenally distant, but Makepeace’s pictures keep the apparatus intimate and close at hand.

***Timothy Makepeace: Reflections on a Tool of Observation: Artwork Inspired by the James Webb Space Telescope*** Through Jan. 5 at the *National Academy of Sciences*, 2101 Constitution Ave. NW. Open by appointment.

## Thebe Phetogo

Arranged in two rows, the 16 paintings in Thebe Phetogo's show at Von Ammon Co. bear a resemblance to a lineup of criminals. But the subjects of the Botswana artist's "Blackbody Rogues' Gallery" are too fantastical to be taken for the usual suspects. Some of their bodies appear to be made of loosely linked tubers, and bared teeth give a few of their faces a skull-like quality. One visage seems to have merged with a massive butterfly, to ominous effect.

All but two of the figures are posed on single-hue expanses that resemble TV or movie green screens — except in a more lurid shade that suggests some kind of corrosive chemical. The green is actually paint, but the purplish brown that represents flesh in many of the pictures is shoe polish. Phetogo uses that substance to invoke blackface, once used in American and European minstrel shows but also in Ghana's "concert party" performances.

Several of these paintings depict African political or mythological figures who are probably unknown to D.C. gallery-goers. Yet the vehemence of Phetogo's work is universal. His pictures are as caustic as their acrid green backgrounds.

***Thebe Phetogo: Blackbody Rogues' Gallery*** Through Jan. 2 at Von Ammon Co., 3330 Cady's Alley NW.

