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Art exhibits inspired by science fiction and medicine

By Maggie Fazeli Fard

“The Alien’s Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.” at the Corcoran Gallery of Art; “Crossing the Line” at National Academy of Sciences

Two new exhibits walk the line between art and science, displaying works inspired by science fiction and medicine.

“The Alien’s Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.,” at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, looks at the modern world through the eyes of historians visiting Washington from another planet.

Artist Ellen Harvey imagines the city tens of thousands of years from now; humans are long gone and Earth is essentially an archaeological site. Her artwork represents how interplanetary visitors might see the ruins and relics left behind, focusing on Washington’s neoclassic structures. The idea is to see the city in the way tourists now visit Greece or Rome or Pompeii.

The exhibit’s self-guided tour features a map — the “Alien’s Guide” — of all the reconstructed sites, such as the White House and the World War II Memorial. Because of the predominance of columns and marble, the aliens refer to humans as “Pillar-Builders.” They label the Capitol “The Really Complicated Pillar-Thing” and the Lincoln Memorial “The Flat Pillar-Thing.” One gallery is an education room for alien children, teaching them about classic and neoclassic styles.

Harvey’s aliens make some hilarious assumptions. For example, because the Earth is largely covered by water, they assume humans were a semiaquatic species, living in oceans and spawning once a year while building pillar cities on land for some unknown reason. Because classic and neoclassic architecture is found worldwide, they conclude that humans were telepathic.

“Crossing the Line,” at the National Academy of Sciences, is a less-tongue-in-cheek exhibit. It features paintings by Steve Miller based on the work of Rod MacKinnon, a Nobel Prize-winning neurobiologist.

Miller’s paintings juxtapose photographs, drawings and silk-screened images with excerpts from MacKinnon’s notebooks.

According to an exhibition guide, the scientist and the artist met in 2003 at Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York. Miller was working with scientists there on advanced imaging practices and MacKinnon was investigating protein structures. It was “not surprising that Miller became fascinated with visual nature, vocabulary, and tools of MacKinnon’s work: the graphic quality of his calculations and diagrams, the computer modeling he experimented with to grasp the three-dimensionality of proteins, and X-ray crystallography technology itself,” says the guide.

The result is a series of pieces that, while based on reality in the most micro sense, take on a surreal, almost impressionist quality.

“The Alien’s Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.” is on display through Oct. 6 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 17th St. NW. “Crossing the Line” opens Aug. 5 at the National Academy of Sciences, 2101 Constitution Ave. NW.



Ellen Harvey, *Alien Souvenir Stand*, 2013, oil on aluminum, watercolor and latex paint on clayboard, wood, aluminum sheeting, propane tanks, and Velcro.