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Woojin Chang, "-scape," photo courtesy of Conner Contemporary Art

Ten objects that will amaze you

By Michael O'Sullivan,

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In a city of amazing art, some is a little more amazing than others.

We're not talking about the blockbuster museum show, or the one that everyone in town is talking about. A line around the block proves nothing.

We're talking about the strange and the singular object; the artifact so stupendous and surprising that, when you see it, it makes you stop in your tracks and say, "How on earth did I almost miss that?"

Well, we're not going to let you miss it.

Here are 10 objects of drop-dead beauty and lingering wonder. Some you've heard of; some you haven't. None will you soon forget.

"-SCAPE"

For his thesis show this spring, art-school grad Woojin Chang wanted to make a piece that expressed his feelings about growing up in South Korea. The resulting 29-foot-wide digital print (see inset) depicts a landscape whose terrain is made up of tens of thousands of tiny people — each smaller than a dime — scrambling atop one another in a struggle for survival.

Created from roughly three dozen figure drawings that the artist scanned into his computer, shrank and then multiplied, the picture is a showstopper. Chang says he's influenced by video games, but nevertheless hopes that viewers will see the serious side to his work.

Through Aug. 22. Conner Contemporary Art, 1358 Florida Ave. NE. 202-588-8750. www.connercontemporary.com. Free.

"KATE"

From a distance, Chuck Close's portrait of Kate Moss looks like another of the artist's signature, large-format photographs. The size of a beach towel, it makes the supermodel's greasy, unkempt hair and blemishes all too apparent. She's still beautiful though.

More beautiful is the fact that it's a tapestry. Created on an electronic loom from a daguerreotype original, the picture mixes old and new technology. Though it looks black and white, Moss's face is rendered in colored threads woven together in accordance with instructions contained in a digital "weave file." The instructions are complex: A single weave file reportedly contains more raw data than all of Shakespeare's plays combined.

Through Sept. 5 in the "Capital Portraits" exhibition. National Portrait Gallery, Eighth and F streets NW. 202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285). www.npg.si.edu. Free.

PEACOCK ROOM

The Peacock Room has never looked this good. Well, maybe it did one day in the spring of 1908.

That's when art collector Charles Lang Freer had photos taken of the room, whose furnishings he had purchased a few years earlier and transported from the home of a wealthy Londoner to his mansion in Detroit. In London, the room (designed by painter James McNeill Whistler) was a showcase for Chinese blue-and-white porcelain, and nothing else. Freer turned it into a showcase for a variety of ceramics from not just China, but also from Japan, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran and Korea, and in every color of the rainbow.

In more recent years, long after Freer moved his art collection to the museum that bears his name, the museum restored the Peacock Room to the way it was in London.

This spring, the room — named for the subject of a Whistler painting that hangs there — got an extreme makeover. The 81 pieces of blue-and-white porcelain that had long decorated its shelves have been replaced with 254 items of exquisitely mismatched pottery. Piece for piece, it's a duplicate of the way it looked in 1908, in Freer's house.

If it sounds a bit chockablock, it is, without being a jumble. Freer never meant the room to be a museum piece, however, but an aesthetic laboratory.

Beginning Aug. 18, the museum plans a special treat. Every third Thursday, it will open the room's window shutters between noon and 5 p.m., casting Freer's vision in an even better light.

Through spring of 2013. Freer Gallery of Art, Jefferson Drive at 12th Street SW. 202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285). www.asia.si.edu. Free.

SEASCAPES

Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto's black-and-white seascapes — 13 of which are on view along one long, gently curving wall — feel like portholes along the side of a motionless ship. Lit by spotlights in an otherwise darkened room, they seem to glow from within.

Stand at one end of the gallery, and you can almost take them all in at once. If they're windows, they look out on more than water and sky. It's something unseen — Sugimoto has called them pictures of eternity — that he's really aiming his camera at.

Through Aug. 28 in the "Fragments in Time and Space" exhibition. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW. 202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285). www.hirshhorn.si.edu. Free.

"ONE CANDLE, CANDLE PROJECTION"

The first thing you notice upon entering the Tower, an almost hidden gallery on the fourth floor of the National Gallery of Art's East Building, is the open flame.

Normally a museum no-no, the single lit candle is the centerpiece of a tightly focused — though surprisingly expansive — exhibition of works by video artist Nam June Paik. Shot by a live, closed-circuit video camera, the flame appears, via multiple projectors, in flickering mirror images all around the darkened room, turning the space into a chapel of sorts.

The spiritual allusion is fitting. The show also includes two equally cosmic video works. One centers on a statue of the Buddha; the other, a simple egg.

Through Oct. 2 at the National Gallery of Art. Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue NW. 202-737-4215 (TDD: 202-842-6176). www.nga.gov. Free.

"SIX MONTHS LATER"

Darren Almond's spooky, enigmatic photo isn't one picture, but 1,440.

Arranged in a 36-by-40-frame grid, the pictures show a corner of the British artist's studio. Taken sequentially — at one minute intervals from just past midnight to the following midnight — the photos are identical, except for the time displayed on a digital wall clock. That, and the subtly changing light from a nearby window.

Viewed up close, it's an inchworm's view of the passage of time. Seen from afar, it looks like a color field painting, with night bleeding into day, and back again.

Through Oct. 2 in the "Left Behind" exhibition. Phillips Collection, 1600 21st St. NW. 202-387-2151. www.phillipscollection.org. Saturdays and Sundays: \$10, \$8 for students and seniors, free for members and children 18 and younger. By donation Tuesday-Friday.

"SELF PORTRAIT"

You don't have to like orange to appreciate Sam Scharf's "Self Portrait," but it helps.

A dose of visual vitamin C, the work is essentially a walk-in 8-by-8-by-8-foot crate that's painted entirely orange inside. Lit by a single light bulb, the crate contains a tree stump on which to sit and contemplate ... well, what exactly?

Take a hint from the title. It's a portrait, but not of the artist. Rather, it's a mirror, inviting viewers to confront their own feelings — pleasure, anxiety — about color, in its purest form. The work (also featured on the cover), Scharf says, is all about awareness. One viewer described the experience as "invasive." Says Scharf, "I thought that was a positive response."

Through Sept. 25. Arlington Arts Center, 3550 Wilson Blvd., Arlington. 703-248-6800. www.arlingtonartscenter.org. Free.

POPE-LEIGHEY HOUSE

It's tempting to describe the area's only Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home that's open to the public as a jewel box. At a mere 1,200 square feet and with a hallway built to the same tight specs as the corridor of a train's sleeping car, its compact chambers do contain marvels: abstract, cutout window forms; an elegant cantilvered roof, subtly varied colors and textures.

But it's the building as a whole that's the gem. Built in 1940 of cypress, brick, glass and concrete — and with nearly every detail, including the furniture and the orientation of screw heads, overseen by its control-freak architect — the house is a triumph of obsessiveness.

Wright's attention to detail will amaze, but don't get lost in it, or you'll miss the forest for the trees. There's no art on the walls, you'll notice, because the walls are the art.

On permanent view. Woodlawn Plantation, 9000 Richmond Hwy., Alexandria. 703-780-4000. popeleighey1940.org. \$8.50, \$4 for children in grades K-12, free for members of the Friends of Pope-Leighey and Woodlawn.

"ARTISTS IN DIALOGUE 2"

The work of Henrique Oliveira dominates the gallery space that the Brazilian artist shares with Sandile Zulu of South Africa. It's hard not to. Oliveira's muscular sculpture looks like the roots of a giant, invasive plant, or perhaps a massive tumor, that has burst through the walls of the National Museum of African Art, where the two men are showing side by side.

They're a good match. The wild, destructive energy of Oliveira's art is matched by Zulu's 2-D abstractions, which the artist creates with carefully controlled fire.

Before you go, download a free iPhone app guide to the show, in English and Portuguese.

Through Dec. 4. National Museum of African Art, 950 Independence Ave. SW. 202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285). www.nmafa.si.edu. Free.

"BANCKETJE (BANQUET)"

Beth Lipman's masterpiece, acquired by the Renwick Gallery in 2007, is a 20-foot-long oak table cluttered with the aftermath of a decadent dinner party. Rendered entirely in glass — some 400 pieces, including glass rodents — it wasn't originally meant as interactive art. But it has turned out that way.

Inspired by still-life painting, Lipman's work contains an implicit critique of excess. A lobster and a broken glass bowl seem to have been knocked to the floor by a careless guest. According to Renwick chief Robyn Kennedy, hardly a week goes by without museum guards having to reassure some nervous visitor who swears, "It was like that before I walked in the room."

Through April at the *Renwick Gallery*, 17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue NW. 202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285). www.americanart.si.edu/renwick . Free.