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'Academy 2011' at Conner Contemporary Art

By Mark Jenkins
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There are rough — and even rusty-edged — pieces in "Academy 2011," the latest edition of Conner Contemporary Art's annual survey of recent local art-school graduates. But these 20 young artists live in a digitized world, so the show is heavy on video and audio — at least one iPod was inevitable — and digital prints. Also to be expected: work about the environment and personal identity.

The front room is dominated by two Asian-born artists, Woojin Chang and Linling Lu. The former's massive "-scape" initially looks to be a high-contrast photograph of some stark geologic formation. But it's actually a digital montage of thousands of stylized humanoid shapes, climbing up (and sometimes falling from) teetering, antlike mounds.

Lu's sharp-edged circular canvases forgo social commentary for sheer form. Work from this same series, "One Hundred Melodies of Solitude," is also on display at Carroll Square Gallery, but some of the paintings at Conner have gentler color schemes, with large expanses of white or pale blue.

The video work includes Caroline Covington's "Beatings: Baltimore," which combines performance and installation art, and "Dauphin 007," a witty, allusion-heavy tale of a lion king. (Not *the* Lion King: Disney's lawyers needn't drop by.) Also riffing amusingly on show biz is Forest Allread's "Boris and Berry (Video Quilt)," 16 squares of Betty Boop and Nicki Minaj, dancing and falling, and punctuated by a Frankenstein cameo.

The audio pieces include Samuel Scharf's, whose title can't be printed here, in which a babble of various languages resolves to a likewise unprintable word. That expletive gives the work a brash contemporary attitude, but the sound looping is reminiscent of Steve Reich's 1960s experiments.

Camilio Sanin's abstract canvases reach even further back, for a jazzy sensibility that suggests Mondrian (although Sanin's approach is looser and less geometric). In a sense, Jon Malis's work also looks to the past: His brownish digital prints, which evoke organic forms, turn out to be views of brain tissue collected a century ago at St. Elizabeths Hospital. There's one other medical specimen in the show: a freeze-dried dog in Ginny Huo's snarky domestic tableau, "Mother's Table."

Two large sculptures in the courtyard show the continuing allure of heavy metal: Adam Junior's "The Possibility of Connection" is a gravity-defying assemblage of rusted steel twigs, massive yet appealingly delicate. For "Sphere," Dan Goia put a large ball of sod on a steel frame, reversing the usual pattern of human-made objects anchored in earth.

Simpler, yet evocative, are the photographs of Elle Perez, Melissa Prentki and Sierra Suris. Perez depicts — but doesn't seek to define — people contemplating gender-identity issues, while Prentki considers religious institutions by showing uninhabited scenes from Maryland's St. Mary's Seminary. Suris does street portraits, but she doesn't pick her subjects at random. In the digital world, everyone is categorized: These people come from the "Missed Connections" section of Craigslist.