

## *Academy 2012* At Conner Contemporary to Aug. 18

An invaluable student exhibition turns 12

By By Kriston Capps • July 13, 2012



Ali Miller, "Closure" (2011)

By now, Conner Contemporary's "Academy" is Artomatic for the smart set—a long-running undergraduate and graduate show that is easily the most efficient way to discover fresh talent each year. In its 12th iteration, it's also one of the last programs of its kind in the District: There used to be several annual roundups of the best that D.C.'s art programs had to offer, but the other galleries that once held student surveys have dropped out or matriculated. Irvine Contemporary hosted at least six "Introductions" shows before the gallery closed last summer. "Anonymous" was just one Flashpoint program that leaned heavily on work by artists from the Corcoran College of Art + Design, American University, George Washington University, the University of Maryland, and other schools.

For "Academy 2012," exhibition founder Jamie Smith invited BFA and MFA artists from all these institutions, as well as the Maryland Institute College of Art—programs that generate more thesis shows than any viewer could reasonably expect to see. So it might be a surprise to see some familiar names. Ben Tolman's gothic drawings have come a long way since his undergraduate days at the Corcoran. (He just completed his master's at American.) Where he previously drew fantasy fit for the cover of a Tool album, with "Suburbs" he bends his meticulous style into a housing-boom critique. Another "Academy" artist, Selin Balci, showed her organic abstractions, which employ live cultures, at Hamiltonian Gallery last year. Adam Nelson has work in a Foggy Bottom sculpture exhibit across town. Ryan Carr Johnson, who has collaborated with Samuel

Scharf for "Frankenthaler A.D.," a color-field abstraction on a panel riddled with bullets, got his first break as a BFA in "Academy 2006."

There are new faces, too. Elliot Bryant's sculptural installation, "The Curse of the Pop Mirage!," is a bratty take on Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's World," substituting a neon-yellow goldfish-bowl diver for the iconic, plaintive girl in the field. Ali Miller's au-courant "Closure," Alexander Peace's unexpected "Jan Brueghel Flower Painting," and Jason Ressler's brash "Solace in the Hyper-Sphere" round out the painterly set. There's plenty of room for the show's expansive ambitions in sculpture (like Nara Park's paper brick bunker), installation (a smarmy kissing booth by Zachary Goldman), and video (almost every other piece). There's room for risky work, too, the best being a flipbook by Jennifer Jeanne Coster made in the guise of a box of Land-O-Lakes butter.

Conner occasionally promotes an "Academy" artist to \*gogo emerging art projects, its farm league for younger and less saleable artists. Few artists will get that chance—and fewer artists still will get a break otherwise. For every artist in "Academy" that fetches a spot in a group show or nonprofit incubator, there are a dozen more biding their time. The number of outlets for new work from D.C.'s prestigious art programs has declined, but worse still, new gallery openings haven't kept up with the growth of the city. Maybe that helps to explain why so many D.C. undergrad artists stay on to become D.C. grad artists. Too many, though, stick around for degrees, only to drop off.