

In the galleries: Where artists engage with the earth

By **Mark Jenkins**

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Land artists don't entirely follow the backpacker credo, "Take nothing but photographs; leave nothing but footprints." But the members of this loosely aligned movement do sculpt the natural world in ways that (usually) vanish over time. And they certainly take photos, which constitute the bulk of "On Solid Ground," a four-artist show at Gallery Neptune & Brown.

The newest work is a series of large-format photographs by Michael Dax Iacovone, the youngest of the contributors (and the only one who isn't British). The D.C. artist spent the summer solstices of 2019 and 2020 at Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats, where he inscribed geometric figures into the ground and photographed the results via a hovering drone.

The temporary drawings are mathematical and astronomical, but also personal. That's because they (like many of the artist's projects) represent an individual journey. As the title of one picture explains, it depicts "a system to measure myself against the arc of the sunset." Iacovone, gnat-sized from the drone's perspective, stands at the center of the lines he etched in sand, both dominating and being dominated by the vast landscape.

Smaller in scale but delightfully inventive, two sculptures by Andy Goldsworthy employed a powerful yet transitory force: frozen water. Photos from 1992 and 2001 document pieces in which the Scotland-based artist froze rocks to a quarry face and laced a stone wall with large icicles. Two photos by Richard Long memorialize a 15-day walk in 1985 through Lapland during which he turned stones to face the wind. Long's fusion of land art and performance has influenced many artists, including Iacovone.

David Nash also intervenes gently in rustic terrain, often working with cleaved or charred wood. Among his best-known endeavors was carving a "Wooden Boulder" and leaving it to slide over years toward the Celtic Sea. The Wales-based artist diverges from other land artists by documenting his art with illustrations rather than photos. Executed in soft shapes and gestures, sometimes over stenciled images, the drawings are elegant and lovely. The five pictures here include two renderings of the peripatetic boulder, as well as the near-abstract "Blue Column" and "Black Dome," which was drawn with charcoal, giving it a primal kinship with burned-wood sculpture that a photograph could never approach.

On Solid Ground: Andy Goldsworthy, Michael Dax Iacovone, Richard Long and David Nash Through Dec. 19 at Gallery Neptune & Brown, 1530 14th St. NW.

Visual artists can conjure a mood, but may struggle to express inner feelings. Quilter Stephanie Capps Dyke is one artist who has found a way to make the interior exterior: by stitching self-doubts and exhortations onto head- and face-covering hoods. While one patch barks “Loser,” an opposing message coos “It can’t be that bad.” Three examples of Dyke’s psychological headgear are the most playful items in Target Gallery’s “In My Head, In My Body,” a 22-artist show whose entries move from glib to grim. Six of the artists are from the Washington-Baltimore area, most are from elsewhere in the United States and two are from overseas.

Juried by Shanti Norris, chief curator for the Integrated Arts and Healing program at Fairfax County’s Inova Schar Cancer Institute, the show includes many images of distorted or shattered figures. In pastel and pencil, Mary Murphy renders someone reflected in the most extreme of funhouse mirrors; the drawing’s fleshy colors and ominous plasticity recall Francis Bacon. In Shannon Soldner’s painting of a person in bed, the figure is fragmented like a pane of broken glass. Rebecca Hofmann conveys distress more naturalistically, with a drawing of a person whose limbs are pulled together in a sort of knot.

The human form is less visible in Kathleen Greco’s black-and-white photograph of a body wrapped in a sheet, as if trying on a burial shroud. And it vanishes altogether in Rania Razek’s photo of a pink scarf wafting over a desert scene; the animated wisp of fabric represents a departed soul in this picture, part of a series previously seen at Studio Gallery.

The most potent piece is by Crystal Sim, a Singapore artist whose artist’s book recounts what she terms her “struggle with self-harm.” The book is displayed beneath a video in which the pages are slowly turned, revealing barely recognizable images of cut and burned skin as well as short phrases that tell of depression and self-disgust. The pages themselves are pitted and scarred, and the book’s binding is partly shredded. The distraught mind has used the body as a perverse canvas, and the book serves as an extension of the artist’s flesh. Thus Sim’s painful candor breaches the mind-body divide.

***In My Head, In My Body* Through Dec. 13 at [Target Gallery](#), 105 N. Union St., Alexandria.**

Gayle Friedman

Candy-colored curves are integral to all but one of the found-object sculptures Gayle Friedman has installed at Red Dirt Studio. The assemblages allude to toys and games and appear harmless, yet the local artist has named the show “The Dangerous Playground.” That’s because her creations literally have teeth: Their rounded lines are drawn in space with bandsaw blades.

In addition to the reclaimed blades, given to Friedman by a friend, the sculptures employ scrap wood and leftover house paint. A few are interactive, or keyed to other repurposed items. “Bathtime” is a partly filled tub in which a

The vibrant colors and frisky attitude mask Friedman’s outlook, but she sees the “inherent tension” of a coiled metal blade as a metaphor for the country’s current plight. Speaking recently to gallery visitors, she cited ecological and political issues, as well as the pandemic, as inspirations. Yet her message is not that all sharp edges should be avoided. “You have to accept,” she said, “some part of the danger of being alive.”

Gayle Friedman: The Dangerous Playground Through Dec. 13 at Red Dirt Studio, 4051 34th St., Mount Rainier.
