

GALLERIES

Squinting, she finds new power

BY MARK JENKINS

The human tendency to project familiar images on random visual information, a penchant known as pareidolia, yields the man in the moon and clouds that look like bunnies. That's one inspiration for Deborah Addison Coburn's show at Studio Gallery, "Seeing Through the Mind's Eye." The artist doesn't rely on chance, however, and she's not pondering rocks and mist. She's investigating her own work.

Coburn begins with her abstract oil paintings, selecting sections of them to reproduce in watercolor. Then she uses the smaller works as the basis for larger ones that emphasize such inadvertent features as the central one in "Yellow Head." This procedure requires technology no more modern than a paintbrush yet suggests the way artists use photographic enlargement — and, more recently, the digital dabs called pixels — to identify and emphasize details.

With their bright blues and oranges and shapes bordered in black and dark blue, these paintings have a cartoonish quality. That's not because they're full of faces; Coburn's paintings yield no more fodder for pareidolia than any other jumble of colored blocks and curving lines. But in the process of focusing on and then expanding areas of existing works, Coburn adds definition and vitality. Rather than locate faces, she finds power.

Downstairs at Studio is Barbara Williams's "The Six-Armed Buddha," a series of scroll-like watercolors whose shape and themes derive from Buddhism. Tibetan prayer flags flutter over the door, and the majority of the paintings include vertical text in Pali, the language of many of the religion's earliest known texts. Some of the pictures depict statues of the Buddha, while others are abstracted nature scenes.

The impetus for this work is

more than spiritual. Like Coburn, Williams is examining a technique. She prepares the paper so that the pigment will penetrate the surface irregularly and finishes the process with an indigo wash. The craggy textures and uneven colors give the artworks a timeworn look, while the rippling pigment echoes the branching forms Williams paints. The effect is tactile yet aptly evanescent.

Deborah Addison Coburn: Seeing Through the Mind's Eye and **Barbara Williams: The Six-Armed Buddha** On view through Sept. 26 at Studio Gallery, 2108 R St. NW. 202-232-8734. www.studiogallerydc.com.

Susan Grace and Novie Trump

Using an intriguing mix of styles, Susan Grace turns mountainous West Virginia landscapes into parables of strength and struggle. The local artist's "Lay of the Land," at Hillyer Art Space, features richly textured green-and-brown slopes and vibrant red skies. But four of these seven oil paintings also include human figures, sometimes dominant in the composition and as brawny as the terrain, yet in one picture ghostly and mysterious. There's a trace of comic-book draftsmanship in the outlined forms and even a thought balloon in "Mountain Dreaming of Mountain II."

Grace seems to paint mountains because they're rugged, not pretty. Her canvases draw energy from their disparate and even conflicting styles. Some areas are carefully modeled, while others are sketchy. Some are brightly colored and painterly; others, hard-edged and dominated by line. Rather than simply portray the Appalachian vistas, Grace teases them until the granite melts.

Novie Trump's "Longing for Distant Skies," an ode to the air and its inhabitants, includes birds, feathers and clouds mounted on Hillyer's white walls. The subjects are weightless or nearly so, but the artist renders them in such substantial materials as stoneware and porcelain. Each piece arranges a series of objects, often identical and in rows, although sometimes in simulated flight. To represent the sky can engender, Trump includes the occasional



GREGORY STALEY/COURTESY DEBORAH ADDISON COBURN AND STUDIO GALLERY

Deborah Coburn's "Yellow Head," made from one of her oil paintings, reveals inadvertent features.

ceramic facsimile of a human heart.

A longtime Washington artist who recently moved to Arizona, Trump is trained as an archaeologist and sometimes models her sculptures on bones and other relics. These installations have less of a sense of having been unearthed, although one has tiny blue-and-white cloud pictures under rounds of antique glass. These skies, it seems, are distant

in time rather than space.

Susan Grace: Lay of the Land and **Novie Trump: Longing for Distant Skies** On view through Sept. 26 at Hillyer Art Space, 9 Hillyer Ct. NW. 202-338-0325. www.hillyerartspace.org.

Christian Benefiel

A single piece of driftwood, washed up on land, is rustic. But when manufactured wood pieces

accumulate along riverbanks and seashores, they indicate overdevelopment of land and diminishment of forests. So Christian Benefiel, a native of the Baltimore who has lived in the Baltic region, was not merely being whimsical when he assembled "Sea of Tranquility, Ocean of Doubt."

The wave of interlaced slats, amid which bob unmatched wooden chairs, is a vision of excess and destruction.

The installation occupies most of VisArts at Rockville's Common Ground Gallery, with one aisle along the side serving as a sort of coastal path. The undulating surface is composed of weathered lumber, crisscrossed and supported below by metal rods. Mostly above the boards, but with feet dangling below, are an office chair, a school chair with a built-in desk and eight more chairs. The assemblage hints at disaster, perhaps a tsunami that swept onto land and stole the man-made items. But the piece also is an exercise in reclamation. It repurposes wood that might otherwise clog some cove.

Christian Benefiel: Sea of Tranquility, Ocean of Doubt On view through Oct. 4 at Common Ground Gallery, VisArts at Rockville, 155 Gibbs St., Rockville. 301-315-8200. www.visartscenter.org.

Danni C

Now an undergraduate at the University of the District of Columbia, Danni C might seem a bit young to be pondering the 18th century. But that's what she does in "Tignon," a series of spirited expressionist portraits at the Gallery at BloomBars. A tignon is a head scarf that, because of a 1786 law, women of African descent, whether free or enslaved, were required to wear in southern Louisiana, then a Spanish colony. The bandanna was supposed to make the women less conspicuous to men, but it was quickly incorporated into stylish attire.

The paintings depict women whose only visible article of clothing is a dot-patterned tignon, wrapped or draped to highlight facial features, hands, feet or other body parts that would have been scandalous to reveal in Spanish-ruled New Orleans. There are as many different scarf colors as shades of skin, all arrayed against bright, single-hue backgrounds. This history lesson has both contemporary pertinence and pop-art immediacy.

Danni C: Tignon On view through Oct. 10 at the Gallery at BloomBars, 3222 11th St. NW. 202-567-7713. www.bloombars.com. style@washpost.com

Jenkins is a freelance writer.