

GALLERIES

Taking the art concept outdoors

BY MARK JENKINS

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, local artists Tom Ashcraft and Peter Winant hosted about a dozen people for lunch. The guests had responded to an open call to a bring-your-own-food "community meeting," and most of them were fellow artists. The conversation was fairly heady, although not unprecedented on a stretch of 14th Street that's home to many galleries and theaters.

The congenial, if slightly odd, event was rendered a little stranger by its setting: an elegantly constructed cherry-wood picnic table with a built-in loop of elevated model-railroad track. A three-car G-scale train trundled a few feet above the lunchers' heads, as Ashcraft and Winant discussed Heidegger, ideation, go-go music and a project they're planning for Haitian orphanages.

The venue was not some new theme restaurant, but Hemphill Fine Arts, the gallery now showing "Workingman Collective: Prospects and Provisions." Along with Janis Goodman, Ashcraft and Winant are the core members of the collective, a local group that makes solid conceptual art. The word "makes" is important. Where most conceptual art is fleeting or purely theoretical, Workingman builds stuff to last.

The artists are fans of early-20th-century American craftsmanship and what Ashcraft calls the nation's lost "age of optimism." They have can-do spirit. But in the context of an art gallery, what exactly can they do with it?

The show opens with one of the trio's more conventionally conceptual undertakings, "5 Mile Line." The 2006 piece involved tracing red and blue chalk lines on the streets of Butte, Mont., following a 1914 map of seismic faults and mine tunnels beneath the city. All that remains of this undertaking

are photographs of the lines and their making, plus the map and the team's surveying tools.

Fitting conceptualism's penchant for art that vanishes quickly, "5 Mile Line" leaves only documentation in its wake. Yet the big-sky setting and vintage map also reveal Workingman's taste for the great outdoors and the good old days. At lunch, Ashcraft showed off a battered copy of one of his inspirations: a book titled "The Boy Mechanic: 1000 Things for Boys to Do," originally published when Woodrow Wilson was president.

Conceptual art can overinvest in a single motif, and much of this show is devoted to another outdoorsy, old-timey icon: Lloyd "Trapper" Nelson's wood-frame backpack, devised around 1924. There's one of the originals (not for sale), a picture of the thing and seven immaculate replicas. Buy the piece titled "Provisions" (price available on request) and you'll also get a sketchbook, a pencil and "consultation with Workingman Collective to plan and provision an expedition for the collector."

Americans' perspective on nature has changed since 1924 so, of course, the collective is interested in environmentalism as well as expeditions. One of the show's biggest pieces, titled "Swing," is just that. But the swaying two-sided bench, suspended from a steel frame, is arrayed with house plants that remove volatile organic compounds from the air. Those plants are watered from a rain barrel the artists placed in the alley behind the gallery building, attached to the gutters to collect precipitation that would otherwise flow into the local sewer system.

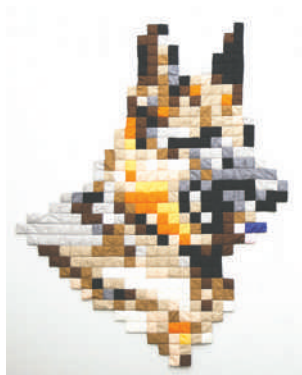
The group's members are college-level art teachers — Goodman at the Corcoran, Ashcraft and Winant at George Mason University — with expertise in sculpture, drawing and printmaking. Yet they're also experienced carpenters



WORKINGMAN COLLECTIVE AND HEMPHILL FINE ARTS



WORKINGMAN COLLECTIVE AND HEMPHILL FINE ARTS



MATT SMITH AND D.C. ARTS CENTER



TODD GARDNER AND D.C. ARTS CENTER

COLLECTIVES: At Hemphill, Workingman Collective offered "5 Mile Line," top, and "Provisions," center. The artists build conceptual art that is meant to last. The Sparkplug group works separately, unlike Workingman. Matt Smith's "Quilt of Pixelated Dog," bottom left, contrasts modern technology and traditional craft. Todd Gardner's "Something for Everyone" plays on contemporary themes.

and contractors with an affinity for woodworking.

"We made everything here," Winant says. Although sometimes making means repurposing: The rain barrel is a 55-gallon syrup container from a nearby Pepsi plant.

In a way, Workingman Collective is a build/design firm without a client. Perhaps that's why its members seek collaborations with outsiders, including friends, kindred spirits and the potential collector who gets a consultation as part of the art.

The group's motto is "your ideas are ours," which Winant calls "a comment on the conceit of originality." Ideas worth appropriating may arise at the gallery lunches, which will be hosted by one or more artists in the collective, and are open to all comers, every Wednesday at 1 p.m. until the show closes.

Marcel Duchamp, the godfather of conceptual art, also reused manufactured objects, but his "readymades" were not chosen for either aesthetic or practical value. The collective seems prepared to jettison (or at least play down) the former. "We quit asking if it's art," Ashcraft says. "Now we just ask, 'Is it any good?'"

This sort of art can be good if it's provocative or intriguing. Yet the collective remains keen on the functional: The swing swings, the train chugs and the rain barrel captures water. And the trio is planning to work in Haiti, a place with no pressing need for whimsy. The Workingman Collective artists may dabble in abstract or absurd ideas, but for them, it's also important to be earnest.

Sparkplug at D.C. Arts

The work of another collective of local artists, Sparkplug, is on display in "Something Other than the Present" at the D.C. Arts Center. The six artists in this exhibition work separately rather than collaboratively, and generally explore in-

dividual themes. These include female self-image and the opposition between modernity and tradition.

The latter theme cuts both ways. Todd Gardner's hand-painted banners play on contemporary themes while taking the form of old-fashioned ads for circus attractions. Matt Smith contrasts modern technology and traditional craft by quilting near-abstract patterns of enlarged computer pixels.

Chandi Kelley's photograph, "Remembrance of an Untouched Wilderness," confines an image of a grand landscape inside an office building's ground-floor display space. And Joseph Hale loosely paints such elementary devices as a canteen and a compass on large-scale photocopies of places and situations that can't be escaped with such simple tools.

Chajana denHarder's short video, "Body (Leg and Hand)," depicts a barefooted woman's methodical assault on a plaster limb, crushing it into dust. This attack on the disappointing body is paired with Dafna Steinberg's "The Toad," a catalogue of disappointing men. Steinberg's work is simply 25 sheets of white paper, each with the red outline of a kiss and the name of a man — from Adam to Wayne — who didn't turn out to be a prince. It's conceptual art but as personal as a lipstick trace.

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WORKINGMAN COLLECTIVE: PROSPECTS AND PROVISIONS

on view through Aug. 20 at Hemphill Fine Arts, 1515 14 St. NW. 202-234-5601. www.hemphillfinearts.com.

SOMETHING OTHER THAN THE PRESENT

on view through July 17 at the D.C. Arts Center, 2438 18th St. NW. 202-462-7833. www.dcartcenter.org.

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BOOK WORLD

Grim yet fascinating reading

Murder mystery underscores violence on fringes of ordinary life

BY STEVE DONOGHUE

Anyone who's ever lived in a small apartment building full of quirky (usually a euphemism for "extremely irritating") tenants has probably imagined one of them suddenly found dead or killing somebody else. It's natural: The possible perpetrators are all collected in one place, the tensions are high and there's no love lost among any of the suspects.

One such place, perhaps not much different from any other, is Lichfield House, the nucleus of Ruth Rendell's new novel, "Tigerlily's Orchids." It pleases Rendell to follow the long literary tradition of red-herring titles: The woman known as Tigerlily hardly signifies in the book's plot and doesn't even live at Lichfield House; the young man who forms a passionate, spontaneous attachment to her, Stuart Font, is the real motor of the story. He has recently moved to Lichfield House and invites his neighbors to a housewarming party. This device allows Rendell to present us with those neighbors in all the scrupulous, almost forensic detail for which she's famous. We get the aggressively supercilious building superintendent, the trio of flighty young girls, the brainless middle-aged married couple, the reserved elderly gentleman — all rendered perfectly, with the throwaway ease of a practiced master.

The main joy of reading Rendell has never been investigatory; indeed, in most of her books (which are not so much whodunits as whydunits), the expected murder and attendant sleuthing are decidedly anticlimactic. Her police always sound believably policelike, and their investigations are briskly done. But especially in her latest novels, Rendell concentrates most of her acuity on social observation. It sounds like a dull alternative to the psychopathic

carnage that fills so many contemporary murder novels, and yet it's spellbinding.

Stuart is a handsome narcissist who's having an affair with the wife of a bluff and bullying lawyer. Rendell may have created Stuart, but she doesn't like him in the least, and when she tells us that his apartment was "unfurnished but for three mirrors, a king-size bed in the bedroom, and a three-seater sofa in the living room," she's doing a bit of damning summary: the vanity, the sloth and sexual predation, and that neat little "three-seater sofa" to signal the affair. Stuart sets out every day "having contemplated his reflection in the mirror to his great satisfaction." He takes up smoking so he has a reason to visit the shop where he first spotted Tigerlily, and despite the fact that he's running out of money, he airily refuses his parents' advice that he get a job. When Tigerlily asks him, "Are you good man?" and he answers in the affirmative, we want to howl with laughter. It's certainly not an assessment shared by the man he's cuckolding, who beats him up twice in the course of the novel.

In other words, in the world of murder novels, Stuart is ripe for killing. But it's another character — one tangential to the book's main action — who exerts the most fascination here. Sixty-

year-old Olwen Curtis, one of Stuart's neighbors in Lichfield House, is the dark heart of this novel. She's a bitter, solitary alcoholic with one besetting worry, as Rendell tells us: "If asked (by that inner enquirer to whom the secrets of all hearts may be told), she would have said she was afraid of nothing unless it was being denied access to drink." In Olwen, Rendell has created a stark and credible portrait of addiction and its costs — costs Olwen learns with bleak clarity when a series of snowstorms curtails her ability to buy her own liquor. "Nothing leads to the making of discoveries like an enforced change in one's lifestyle," we're told, and Olwen's increasingly degrading discoveries make for grim but fascinating reading.

"Grim but fascinating" also works to describe the whole of Rendell's oeuvre, and it certainly applies to this latest novel. Rendell has always excelled at underscoring the grim violence that lurks on the fringes of everyday life, a path she trail-blazed long before other mystery writers. It's hard to think of another writer in the genre doing this sort of thing so well, and none does it better.

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TIGERLILY'S ORCHIDS
By Ruth Rendell
Scribner. 257 pp.
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Ruth Rendell concentrates most of her acuity on social observation. It sounds like a dull alternative to the psychopathic carnage that fills so many contemporary murder novels, and yet it's spellbinding.