

Review: Picking out a cornucopia of gallery highlights this fall

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A new installation at the University of Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay Campus, portraits of Cold War Afghanistan and an eclectic sampling from Hera Gallery artists on the road in Providence are among the exhibitions worth a scenic drive this fall ...

We begin on the bay, where URI's Graduate School of Oceanography looms above the shoreline in a collection of disparate buildings and research laboratories. The university has been seeking more cohesion in its Narragansett Bay Campus landscape, and earlier this year it took a major step in that direction when a public artwork commissioned by the school and the R.I. State Council on the Arts through the Allocation for Art for Public Facilities Act was unveiled in the lobby of the Ocean Science and Exploration Center.

The act recognizes that art in public places creates a more humane environment, and the resulting installation, a stunning sculpture by Cliff Garten titled "Schooling," is a testament to the power of public art to transform settings into distinctive places that foster identity and community, invite reflection and add graceful notes of beauty and aesthetic to otherwise impersonal environments.

"Schooling," a sculptural installation appearing in front of a white wall and cast in LED lighting that gives off a sense of bioluminescence, is an energetic and dynamic work, as well as a sublime marriage of art and place. Suspended by fine aircraft cables at various heights, the sculptor's labor-intensive layered forms repeat, hovering in proximity, becoming a funneled mass of more than 200 individual elements suggestive of a school of fish. The work shimmers and glows in tones ranging from blue to silver, changing in appearance depending on the time of day or night, the quality of the light and the angle at which it is viewed.

Garten, an internationally recognized artist with a reputation for creating evocative site-specific works that integrate man-made landscapes with their surrounding environment, has succeeded here in bridging the nautical focus of the institution that calls the Ocean State its home with the mission of the university in charge of navigating the education of its students.

"Schooling," with its allusion to the habits of both fish and students, is artfully considered and expertly rendered. The ventilated shapes are abstract enough to appear as either fish or vessels (inverted ship hulls). Between the torpedo-shaped pieces of brushed aluminum that make up each individual sculpture are marbles that appear in form and color as pearls, holding it together. Curved cut-outs within each piece give it the quality of semi-transparency; the holes capture the glimmer of the LED lights, evoking the diaphanous quality of marine life. The repetitive nature of the work suggests fleeting movement in a realm of constant motion, and its position aiming at the bay conveys a feeling of eternally forward progress.

Garten's elegant design, an homage to the oceaneering spirit of the state's residents and university, is an inspired and welcome permanent addition to Rhode Island's art landscape. The artist will return to Rhode Island to talk about the sculpture on Wednesday, Oct. 12 at 3:30 p.m. in the Fine Arts Center on the Kingston Campus, followed by a reception at 5 p.m. in the lobby where the sculpture is located, the Ocean Science and Exploration Center on the Narragansett Bay Campus. The event is open to the public.

Perhaps no medium tells the story of war more effectively than the still photograph. What was true when Mathew Brady took his pictures of the Civil War remains so today. On Boon Street in Narragansett Pier, the Bill Krul Gallery

is showcasing an impressive exhibition by photographer Bruce G. Richardson titled "A Photographic Journey Inside Cold War Afghanistan." The 13 scenes are a selection culled from several secret trips the freelance journalist took, risking his life to photograph and report on the Soviet-Afghan War.

The images, taken with a Pentax K1000 SLR camera with a Sigma 35-135 3.5-4.5 lens and exposed on Kodachrome K64 film, have a directness and intensity that mark the best photojournalism. The behind-the-scenes story of a traditional people forced to fight for their way of life is illuminated in intimate details: children, teens and young men being taught how to use guns and weapons; resistance fighters at prayer in the mountains; the creased faces of village elders, refugees and riflemen saying more with a direct gaze into the camera than a thousand politicians with a thousand platforms could ever say.

In "The Face of War," (Chamkani, Afghanistan), soldiers are huddled in a stone hut, armed to the teeth, sitting on carpets. One drinks coffee from a ceramic cup. Fragile little pots are wedged next to one another incongruously on a stone mantel. The moment captured reveals the humanity that endures in all wars lost to the world in a blur of abstract statistics and manipulated headlines.

The show runs through Sept. 30, and the artist himself is at the gallery on Wednesdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

A bit farther afield, the artists of Hera Gallery in Wakefield are exhibiting as part of an exchange with AS220 in Providence. The show, "Hera Works," running through Saturday at AS220 Project Space, serves as a sampler of new work by 16 Hera artists. (AS220 artists will reciprocate at Hera later this fall.)

Eclectic and edgy, the exhibition illustrates Hera's strengths as one of the most consistently provocative arts collectives in Rhode Island. Among the most powerful works on display are slightly disturbing and surreal but strangely compelling pieces by Claudia Flynn and Hera Gallery Director Islay Taylor.

Flynn's "Danseur Noble," in which she combines a piece of driftwood with the plastic head of a doll, is a striking coupling of found objects - one a gift of nature, the other a thrown-away toy that resonates with lost innocence and the ravages of time. The forms work together to create an expressive, emotive whole. Every viewer may see something different in the doll's expression, but a certain toughness and stoicism - and, yes, nobility - come through, a sense of surviving despite hardships, suggested by the full extension of the driftwood's four limbs.

Equally creepy and captivating are Taylor's pieces of jewelry-like brooches titled "Biopsy," referencing samples of living tissues cut from the body for the purpose of diagnoses. Made from plastic, glass, retro-glo thread, enamel, copper and surgical steel, the brooches stick to a wall like large barnacles and are jarringly depicted in a photograph affixed to a woman's body, the white forms repeated on a white shirt in a scene that both disturbs and fascinates.

Using found or reclaimed objects, artist Troy West creates an eloquent plea from nature that alludes to manmade environmental disasters like the BP oil spill. The piece, "Apocalypse," made from wood and copper, combines text and an abstracted shore bird in a simple construction that serves as a poetic call to arms in the fight against societal indifference.

Intriguing contributions from other Hera artists - including Linda Denosky-Smart, Cynthia Farnell, Michael Yefko, Elizabeth Lind, Carl Dimitri, Roberta Richman, Jeannette Jacobs, Jill McLaughlin, Myron Rubenstein, Barbara Pagh, Alexandra Broches, John Kotula and Susan Hayward - make Hera's Providence experiment worth the detour if you find yourself anywhere near the Big Blue Bug in the next couple of days.