

The Washington Post

Exhibits at Hirshhorn, Kreeger museums offer a break from the bustle

September 6, 2014

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“The world is too much with us,” lamented William Wordsworth more than two centuries ago, and things have only gotten worse. The art world, a frenetic, fast-paced, international business, is as preoccupied by the “getting and spending” of life as any other sector. But the Hirshhorn Museum, and at least two others, will take a step back from the madness to explore different ideas about time, nature and escape. Call it a season for disconnection.

“Days of Endless Time” (Oct. 16) is a thematic look at issues that have haunted artists for centuries: solitude, the solace of the natural world and the myriad ways we have of exchanging worldly cares for realms of enchantment, if we focus on our deeper self. Included are some 14 projections and installations by a range of international artists, with an emphasis on work that is deeply immersive, meditative and temporally hypnotic. The exhibition self-consciously grapples with the frittering away of the self in an age of technology and technological distraction, with videos by Hans Op de Beeck, Sigalit Landau, Su-Mei Tse, Siebren Versteeg and others.



Su-Mei Tse, *L'Echo*, 2003, DVD video projection, video still

Tse's "L'echo" uses the cello, and a stunning natural setting, to develop a kind of static polyphony of sound and imagery, overlapping and underscoring each other as a woman in a red dress sends the mournful sounds of a cello out into a yawning mountain chasm. Landau's "DeadSee" depicts a woman floating on a spiral island of watermelons, which slowly unspool in a preternaturally green sea. Seen from above, the effect is surreal and engrossing, a two-dimensional riddle of color and slow, gentle motion. Op de Beeck's "Staging Silence" creates bracingly arid landscapes of modernist design, street scapes and interiors, empty and hushed, but at the scale of a puppet theater. Hands reach in from the sides to create the illusions, which are surprisingly lyrical.

The museum describes the intended experience of the exhibition: "The galleries will be transformed into a compelling refuge where visitors enter a poetic, drifting, reflective realm akin to Jorge Luis Borges' evocations of mirrors, labyrinths, and 'days of endless time.' "

Other museums will explore related ideas, especially the natural order. The Kreeger Museum will present "Emilie Brzezinski: The Lure of the Forest," a look back at the Swiss-born artist's sculpture (Sept. 16). Brzezinski is known for her wood carving, which is rough-hewn yet sinuous. Working with a chain saw and ax, she coaxes wood just past its natural form, into shapes that are intentional enough to be obviously the work of the human hand yet still deeply intertwined with their natural origins.

The Smithsonian Museum of American Art will mark two pivotal anniversaries that have deeply impacted our relation to nature in this country: the century that has passed since the extinction of the passenger pigeon in 2014 and the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act in 1964. "The Singing and the Silence: Birds in Contemporary Art" will include work by a dozen American artists: David Beck, Rachel Berwick, Lorna Bieber, Barbara Bosworth, Joann Brennan, Petah Coyne, Walton Ford, Paula McCartney, James Prosek, Laurel Roth Hope, Fred Tomaselli and Tom Uttech.

The exhibition (Oct. 31) will include 46 different works, but it is not an Audubon-style survey of the bird as biological object. Rather, in the work of these artists, "birds are complex symbols that mirror back to us different facets of our own behavior, habits and values.