

ART

IN THE GALLERIES

Pointed imagery in the aftermath of trauma

BY MARK JENKINS

In Choichun Leung's "The Watchful Eyes," a show of paintings and drawings at Morton Fine Art, the drawings seem to dominate. That's not because the paintings, which are bigger and more colorful, are less compelling on their own terms. But the black-and-white renderings of girls, which speak to the artist's concern with childhood sexual abuse, set the tone for all the work. Images from the drawings infiltrate the paintings, where they become more abstract yet remain charged and haunting.

Leung is a Chinese-British artist who grew up in Wales and is now based in Brooklyn. She performed traditional Chinese music and earned a degree in metalsmithing before teaching herself to paint. Her original style was abstract and aqueous, suggesting the sea that laps three sides of her childhood homeland. There are glimmers of that style in Leung's more recent work, but the pictures are dominated by the figures of girls, often banded together as multitudes. In the show's title work, dozens of heads float amid disembodied hands and dotted lines that represent energy flowing within and among bodies.

This show marks the 10th anniversary of the Young Girl Project, an anti-abuse organization Leung founded in 2012. A drawing the artist made that year, "Bound Girl," shows a child wrapped almost entirely in rope. That captive figure reappears in later works, but always accompanied — in an imagined show of solidarity — by other, unfettered children. In the strikingly arrayed "Girl Gang," from 2020, a tight cluster of dark-haired heads is surrounded by smaller heads in the distance. (Perhaps because they're in some sense autobiographical, the girls in these pictures always appear

Asian, but a wider array of ethnicities, as well as a boy, appear in Leung's drawings on the Young Girl Project's website.)

Brightly hued and more complexly composed, the paintings place the girls in appealingly surreal landscapes. Leung once worked as an assistant to pop artist Peter Max, and her pictures have some of his comic-book-like directness and verve. In such pictures as "Four Girls in the Dreamworld," rendered in ink and gouache, the hard-edge figures move among soft shapes and watery colors. Leung's glowing reveries are animated by trauma, but they can look like places of refuge.

Choichun Leung: The Watchful Eyes Through Feb. 17 at Morton Fine Art, 52 O St. NW, #302. Open by appointment.

Michelle Lisa Herman

In Michelangelo's "Last Judgment," a fresco on the Sistine Chapel's altar wall, St. Bartholomew holds his own flayed skin. Painted on the drooping skin is a contorted face that's generally considered to be the painter's. Michelle Lisa Herman's interpretation of this image is a comic one, but perhaps also a sort of self-portrait: The artist found a deflated pink plastic blowup doll and attached it to a Roomba vacuum that begins to clean Stone Tower Gallery every Saturday and Sunday at 3 p.m. One possible interpretation, Herman's website offers, is that the motorized assemblage depicts the perception of women as "machines for cleaning and sex."

Machines, isolation and (mis)communication are among the themes in Herman's "Always, Already, Never, Better, Faster, Stronger," but so is the artist's status as a woman who works in what the show's statement calls "the male dominated field of



"The Watchful Eyes," by Choichun Leung, is part of a Morton Fine Art show marking the 10th anniversary of the Young Girl Project, an anti-abuse organization Leung founded in 2012.

technology." The multimedia exhibition includes video, 3D-printed sculpture and "Let's Talk Art," a book of fictional artist interviews generated via an artificial-intelligence program that educated itself by ingesting much of the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. The AI-written exchanges are amusingly, yet plausibly, repetitive and

inarticulate.

At the center of the gallery is a video in which a laser cutter engraves the laser waveform of a recording of John Cage's "4 33", the 1952 composition that consists entirely of unplanned ambient sounds. Unlike Cage's chance-driven work, Herman's is deliberate. It has to be, since it's produced by machines, not

happenstance. But when that pink-flesh-bearing Roomba chugs randomly around the room, it's clear that Herman has a taste for serendipity.

Michelle Lisa Herman: Always, Already, Never, Better, Faster, Stronger Through Feb. 20 at Stone Tower Gallery, Glen Echo Park, 7300 MacArthur Blvd., Glen Echo.

Willem de Looper

Made over just four years, the luminous Willem de Looper abstractions in "Paintings, 1968-1972" demonstrate a subtle but significant transition. The 11 pictures at Hemphill Artworks, unexhibited for many years, shift from all-over compositions to one in which the watery colors are stacked horizontally, although still lushly blended.

De Looper (1932-2009) was 17 when he moved to Washington from his native Netherlands. He eventually became a guard at the Phillips Collection, whose holdings shaped the styles of many D.C. colorists, and worked his way up to serving as the museum's curator from 1982 to 1987. Throughout his time at the Phillips, he pursued a parallel career as a painter.

De Looper was influenced by his local near-contemporaries, notably Morris Louis, in addition to such artists as Paul Klee and John Marin, who were well-represented at the Phillips. De Looper emulated Louis's technique of staining canvas with diluted washes of then-new acrylic pigment.

Yet there are crucial differences. Louis (1912-1962) worked on unstretched canvas, left areas of blank fabric as essential parts of his compositions and decided the pictures' final dimensions after he finished applying pigment. De Looper painted within predefined borders and filled the canvases with overlapping hues. These are often within a narrow range, such as the blazing yellows of an untitled 1970 picture or the bands of oceanic blues in 1972's "Pinetop." The color schemes are more diverse, however, in such standouts as an untitled 1969 picture in which a cloud of vivid violet appears to pool atop layers of yellow and green. It's the most Louis-like painting, and also an example of de Looper at his most potent and assured.

Willem de Looper: Paintings, 1968-1972 Through Feb. 26 at Hemphill Artworks, 434 K St. NW. Open by appointment.

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