

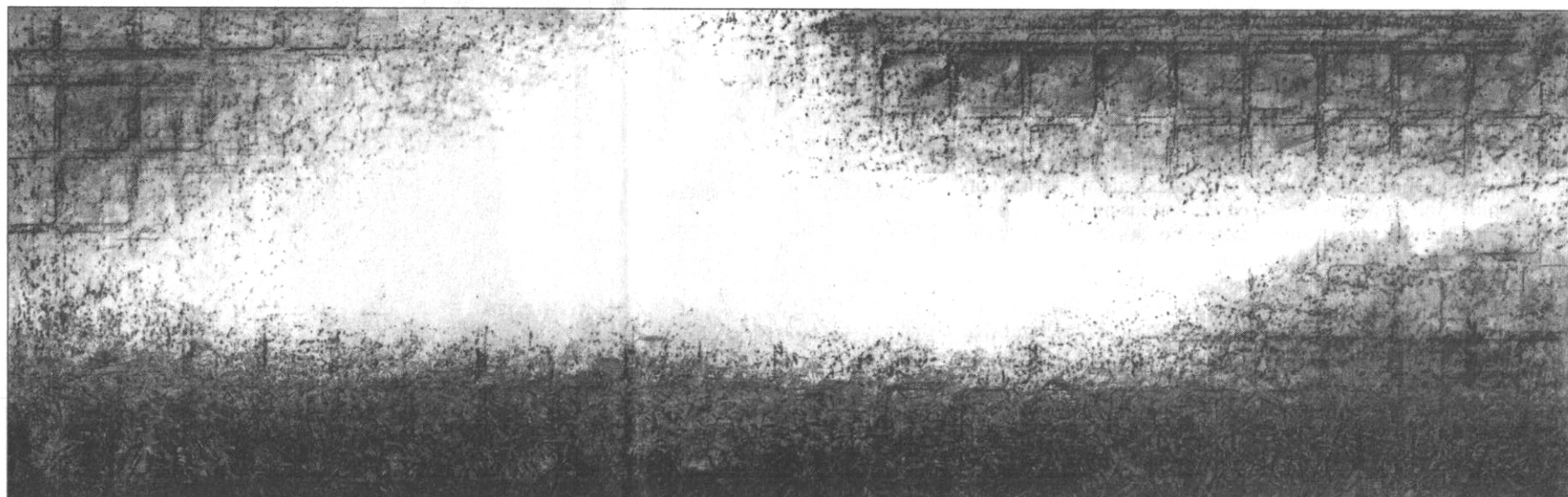
"Playful" at BlackRock Center for the Arts in Germantown is, at first view, a lighthearted exhibit, with depictions of toys and allusions to games and rock-'n'roll. "___scape," in the Kaplan Gallery at VisArts, "plays" on a more conceptual level with the definition of landscape as idea, orientation, or state of being rather than simply the depiction of scenery.

ON VIEW

BY CLAUDIA ROUSSEAU

The exhibit at BlackRock groups Mark Behme, Mark Giaino and Emily Green Liddle because they all appear to express a "playful" approach to their art, from using funny titles to bright, even garish colors, to making detailed portraits of actual toys. Fortunately, that's not all that is here.

Behme is a master wood carver, widely known for his polychromed figurative pieces with often complex iconography. A few years ago he started making inventively constructed electric guitars, tiptoeing around the aesthetic problem that as works of sculpture they are also functional instruments — they can be played. Behme has simply ignored the issue, and has devoted himself to creating these ambiguous works. In fact, it's their duality that appeals to him. "All my work is also about something else," he writes. "I am always seeking the expressed duality in all things." With that conceptual caveat, one can see the playful side in



MIKE FARRELL

Something seen, yet not seen, is the aim of artist Michael Farrell in a series of drawings in "___scape" at VisArts. Here "Swarm" shows his almost mystical use of light in these works.

Behme's guitars, many of them featuring images on both front and back of lovers or angels, with references to song titles or musical groups (e.g. "Guns and Roses" literally depicts both). These are beautiful and entertaining objects that tempt viewers to touch, even to play them — frustrating, of course, in the gallery environment.

Giaino is a good painter with a fine technique and traditional handling. His work in this show is of two kinds: small scale works representing individual toys or video game figures, and portraits. I found the paintings of toys essentially soulless, void of the character that might have made them interesting. On the other hand, the portraits are penetrating and formally

stronger. A tiny still-life of a porcelain bowl near the door titled "Open and Closed" with its creamy gray ground was the best of Giaino's in the show.

Liddle's works also focus on the notion of duality, pairing unexpected objects like fruit and keys, pigs and nails, cherries and bear traps, painted in a style that evokes advertising and pop art. With these large-scale objects sharply outlined against plain backgrounds of colors like yellow, orange and blue, they seem to seem playful, even cartoonish, yet there's a dark feeling to them which is unsettling. The subject pairs repeatedly contrast something vaguely feminine, like fruit, with something hard, dangerous and, perhaps, masculine, thus playing on themes of gender and contradiction in contemporary pop culture. In the end, however, although they seemed to appeal visually to a 9-year-old in the gallery, they left me indifferent.

"___scape" presents the work of a broad range of artists working in very different media,

and each bringing another noun to complete the word: sitescape, timescape, aircscape, etc. A fascinating premise proposed by curator Susan Main, taking the "land" out of landscape allows the artists to think more about the intangibles — things like memory, culture, sense of place — that characterize our relationship to the environment. Horizon lines are not required here, as space opens in a more encompassing fashion.

John M. Adam's graphite powder drawing installation "Confluence" activates the gallery in just this way. The viewer is forced to move into the right place to see the drawing of a cube containing what might be foliage pop out from a corner, while branches wrap organically around the wall. Kim Manfredi's small enamels on wood evoke the space of microbes — worlds within worlds. Lisa Kellner presents us with "skinscapes" in subtle graphite drawings identified by the person whose skin is being explored. For example, "Roadmap: Inger, White Fe-

male, Age 77 series" shows rippling waves of aged skin as a landscape of great beauty and strangeness.

Michael Farrell is represented here with a group of extremely delicate, small-scale drawings in graphite and colored pencil on parchment. Many have the character of Chinese landscape painting without any definable forms. Most striking in these is the sense of light moving outward from a deep center that simultaneously invades and shapes the image. Farrell's drawings project a sense of compelling quiet, a serene meditative feeling that is absolutely magnetic. I particularly liked a small vertical piece titled "Fissure" which seems to evoke a mountainside in dawning light without describing one, and a larger drawing, "Swarm," worked with the addition of acrylic on mylar, a support that provides a fundamental sheen under the color.

Theo Willis spent a year methodically applying 1,000 layers of four types of white household paint to four small panels. The

results are "stratascapes" of the paints, which layered, have completely different surfaces: pillow-like, smooth, fluffy or collapsed. The reliefs projected on brackets have a kind of geologic feel, as though they describe some archaeological find of earth layers, perhaps chalk. The works are accompanied by Willis' careful recording in penciled scores of every day's layering.

Rachel Sitkin's gouache paintings of enormous resource mining pits are like perfect architects' drawings of what are, in the environment, noisy, dirty, destructive industrial operations. The incongruity between the immaculate rendering and the subject points to the conundrum between the need for resource technology against the integrity of the landscape. Not much playing here, except for the nuanced divide between the serenity of these paintings and their ominous subjects.

For exhibit information, visit www.blackrockcenter.org and www.visartsatrockville.org.