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Sitting in Uncertainty **(<https://bmoreart.com/2022/05/sitting-in-uncertainty.html>)**

Review of 'Fields and Formations: A Survey of Mid-Atlantic Abstraction' at the Katzen Arts Center

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hite waves of paper arch and twist. Neon ropes
stretch like muscles. Empty pages inhale. The

Materials around us are alive with meaning if we stop to look. What happens to a hundred-year-old story when we cut out its pages? Or to a map when we paint over its colors and borders? As objects around us evolve, they offer the opportunity to challenge our expectations, open our minds, and see changes in ourselves.

Curated by Kristen Hileman and organized by the Delaware Contemporary, *Fields and Formations* (<https://www.american.edu/cas/museum/2022/fields-and-formations.cfm>) at American University's Katzen Arts Center invites viewers to consider color, form, and shape as tools for transformation. As the introductory wall text states, the work of twelve women and nonbinary artists based in the Mid-Atlantic region offer "balance and resolution in a contemporary world that can feel chaotic and divisive." But these artists don't present an escape from chaos—rather, they ask us to look, listen, and sit inside it.



Natessa Amin, *Weft*, 2020, acrylic on canvas



(<https://bmoreart.com/content/u>)

Alex Ebstein, *Shadows*, 2020, hand-cut PVC yoga mats, embroidery floss, false eyelashes, powder coated aluminum, and hardware on panel in custom frame

Carol Brown Goldberg's painting, *In What We Take to be Real*, creates a strange and welcoming opening to the exhibition. Vibrant acrylic shapes reminiscent of children's toys and cartoons float in a region behind the card-table-sized canvas surface, with a tenderness that invites the viewer to climb in. The rectangular congestion in Goldberg's painting contrasts with the stretched, organic fields in Alex Ebstein's four framed works to the right. Ebstein incorporates yoga mats, metal fixtures, and embroidery in painterly explorations of aesthetics, gender, and curated notions of health and wellness. In *Figments* (2020), a sensuous mouth made of powder-coated aluminum adds physical strength to not only the female body but also to her voice. Rounded and clearly hand-cut shapes transform the recognizable texture of the mass-produced yoga mats, calling to mind commodified ideas of health.

Textural investigation is central to Jo Smail's work in the next room. Two of her larger pieces engage layers of her life experiences and personal/historical background through physically layering fabric and paint. In the shaped painting *Totem in Three Parts*, which rests on the wall at the height of a person, the South African-born artist addresses the complexities of her lineage with a curved teardrop of black paint atop ornate red, black, and white African fabric on carved wood and fiberboard. In *Black Egg Hatches*, her textile stories feature organic black circles infiltrating black and yellow fabrics patterned with flowers and organized diamond shapes and lines, creating tension between organic forms overtaken by more rigid ones.

Twelve small paintings of various shapes populate the wall opposite Smail's work, and similar to Smail's, these works by Natessa Amin incorporate patterns that reference the artist's heritage, which includes Pennsylvania Dutch, Indian, and African origins. In Amin's work, however, bright acrylic colors playfully push against rectangular and triangular canvases, with a collective display that combines traditional geometric abstraction with curious hand-worked designs.



Arden Bendler Browning, VR Painting 12, 2020, flashe and acrylic on shaped panel

Maren Hassinger draws the viewer back into a physical, verbal reality. Her striking sculpture *Wrenching News* confronts the power of the media, reshaping ripped and twisted New York Times pages into two loud, thick circles, one on the wall and another on the floor. Twisted into stems and wrapped into bouquets, these papers vibrate with indecipherable noise, creating an emotional memorial out of questionably objective reporting.

While Hassinger's work questions the constructions of narrative within our world, another set of works by Goldberg imagines entirely new spaces to inhabit. Created in pointillist fashion, two ink drawings from

1978 create unfamiliar, map-like compositions. Titled *Hyacinthetical Nebulae* and *Narsynthetical Nebulae*, both drawings feature round target shapes that evoke danger or battle and resemble war maps. To the left, the shimmer of a more recent piece, *NT 16* (2011) catches the light. A dark, galactic void calls me in, yet a celebratory glitter and energetic pours of acrylic paint release the tension.

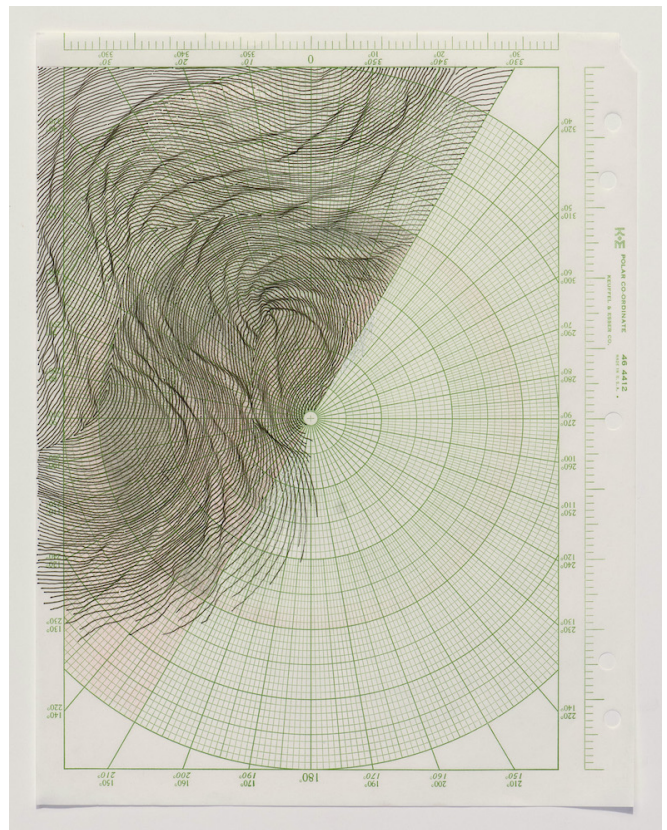
Contrasting with paintings that tower over the viewer, the notebook-sized drawings of linn meyers pull you in with a different scale of intrigue. On graph paper, meyers creates waves of ink that could be topographical maps or wrinkles of fabric. With numbers and hole punches in the paper, the pieces give numerical definitions to imagined, intimate spaces, suggesting that human emotion can feel regulated by impossible limits. Another series features pages cut from a 1900 book that compiles the art critic John Ruskin's writings on the landscape painter J.M.W. Turner. The referenced literary work illustrates how the words of a critic can shape the perception of an artist's work. Through excision, meyers eliminates most of the text on each page to leave specific poetic messages behind, such as *the greatest of all feelings – an utter forgetfulness of self*. Creating gaping geometric holes, meyers removes all but a few words of this male critic, leaving behind single phrases that concentrate on sublime, emotional dimensions.

Large, striking paintings by Maggie Michael command the nearby wall. Vigorous strokes, pours, and splashes of paint combine with materials such as soil, stone, and ground metal in *Wind, Water, Stone (Paz meets Lispector on a cliff)*, evoking labor, strength, attack, and disaster.

Arden Bendler Browning presents her three-step process of creating work as three separate displays. Inspired by both her travels and studio, she creates her first pieces as colorful collages of watercolor, ink, spray paint, and paper on board. Browning then transforms these mountainous and at times unidentifiable shapes into virtual reality spaces. Next to her collages in the gallery, visitors can put on a VR headset and walk through the invented realms. Soft yet vivid strokes of paint build a valley of safety as I step beneath and on top of the artist's work. Removing the headset, I see Browning's final step: a wide, oval-shaped canvas titled *VR painting*. With a combination of acrylic, gouache, and flashe paint, Browning reveals the growth of her process; layers of lively brushstrokes, varying in thickness and opacity, create a dense, exciting final destination.



Jo Smail, Black Egg Hatches, 2021, acrylic, African fabric, and pencil on canvas



linn meyers, Untitled, 2020, ink on graph paper

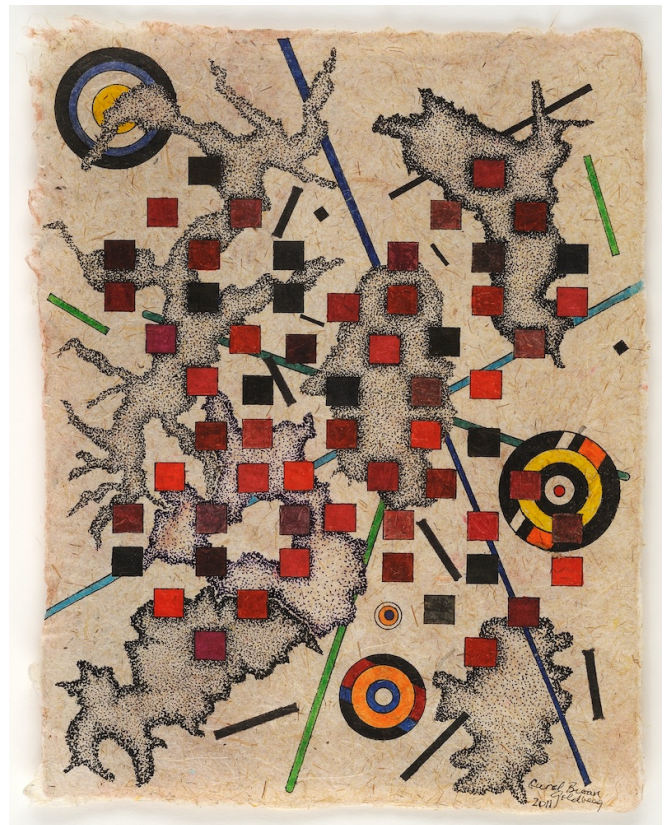
In the final room of the exhibition, artists pose differing perspectives about abstracted body and form. Alexis Granwell constructs soft-looking, creature-like forms atop wooden and cement stands. Each has a unique skin of muted fibers and handmade paper, transforming peculiar shapes into something familiar.

Across from these figures, Jesse Harrod's cotton sculptures could be new species of unidentified organisms, but it is Harrod's sculpture *Tongue* that wrenches me back to the human body. With neon weavings of parachute cord, Harrod welcomes associations of danger, boldness, and adventure, combined with the playfulness of pink, green, and yellow. The tongue shape hanging over the edge of the aluminum frame evokes the Rolling Stones icon, that sensuous muscle that dictates the pleasure of food, sex, and speech. Physically magnifying the size of that muscle emphasizes its importance. Harrod's largest piece, *For the Love of Danny*, demands attention with its height. Stretching floor to ceiling with paracord weaving, the shapes magnify and celebrate the expansiveness of bodies and genders. Yet the piece is literally grounded, lying partially on the floor. Harrod presents feminine and queer bodies as complex, relatable, and human, rather than statues to be objectified.

While Harrod draws from nature with shape and form, Linling Lu does so with color. Opposite Harrod's sculpture, Lu assembles some of the pieces from her series *100 Melodies of Solitude* with an almost two-story display of meditative concentric circle paintings. Enormous circles swallow one another as the artist breaks down the natural world's complexities into a more digestible, repetitively comforting experience. Matching Lu's display in height, Jae Ko's *Drift* punctuates the show with visions of water and clouds. Far above my head, undulating twists and turns of stacked paper snake across the curved museum wall. With each slope, the papers fan like a seashell, outgrowing itself and its bounds exponentially.

This collection of work in *Fields and Formations* provides the public a space to embrace the breadth of our environment and inner selves, even search for acceptance without full resolution. In a world that offers more problems and questions than answers, this exhibition brings us into a state of presence through uncertainty.

This exhibition is on view at the Katzen Art Center at American University
(<https://www.american.edu/cas/museum/2022/fields-and-formations.cfm>) through May 22.



Carol Brown Goldberg, PM 11, 2011, ink on handmade paper



Alexis Granwell, (foreground) Full Bloom, 2021, papier-mâché, handmade paper with linen pulp paint and wood; (left rear) Gently Outwards, 2021, papier-mâché, handmade paper with linen pulp paint and wood; (rear right) Looking On, 2021, papier-mâché, handmade paper with linen pulp paint, denim, plaster, and wood

Words: Katie Hartley (<https://Bmoreart.Com/Contributor/Katie-Hartley>)

Images courtesy of American University



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