

Civilian Art Projects intro  
By Andy Grundberg

The recipe for creating a contemporary art scene is not hard to intuit. Take some innovative, eager, personable young artists, add a few hip commercial galleries and artist-run spaces, some saavy collectors, at least one critic of enthusiasm and intelligence, a pinch of media outlets for such criticism, a nearby museum with a contemporary-art curator, and your choice of a welcoming restaurant, bar, or coffee shop where all these people can meet, and then mix well. Voila! Who needs New York?

The reality is a bit more complicated. Plenty of cities have the minimum daily requirements for an art scene but don't quite pull it off – San Francisco, say, or Boston. That's because art is ultimately about something else: imagination, talent, risk taking, having something to say.

In Washington, D.C., an art scene is taking shape today. That's as much testament to the imagination and risk taking of the people who choose to show contemporary art as of the artists who make it. Civilian Art Projects is a great example of a grass-rooted, arts-community based, independent minded showplace for art that complements the city's other innovative enterprises, from the late, lamented Fusebox to Transformer to the Hirshhorn Museum. The list could go on.

Civilian Art Projects is the brainchild of Jayme McLellan, a co-founder of Transformer and a contemporary of many of the artists she now represents as a commercial galleryist. Her vision is sympathetic to a broad mix of media and styles, she believes in the importance of her generation of artists, and her timing is impeccable. With this, Civilian's first show, she gives us a glimpse of what these young artists have to say.

Jason Falchook's color photographs depict unprepossessing, unpopulated urban spaces lit with the enervating glow of mercury vapor lights. They have the isolated eeriness of surveillance pictures, but the corrugated fences and shutters and stark buildings are their own protagonists. The time is night or nearly so, and without the intersession of the photograph we probably would not linger long to examine the scenes in detail. Falchook calls the series "Contours & Detours," but we might also add a coda, "Places We'd Just as Soon Avoid." Still, the bright light sources give off what passes for warmth, and one suspects that

beyond the terror we are made to feel lies a sympathy for a present that seems equally to speak of the past and the future.

Jason Zimmerman's series "Natural Acts" continues his photographic exploration of incidental evidence supplied by the physical world. Like Falchok, he positions nature and humanity in a tenuous balance, but while Falchok's pictures read as surveillance Zimmerman's appear forensic. Whatever the word "documentary" means when applied to the camera, it has traction here, in images of chipped china and gooey aluminum foil and other frayed objects, but for no imaginable uplifting social purpose. Call it Documentary Degree Zero, a collection of evidence for which there is no crime.

Taken together, and in company with the other artists on the roster of Civilian Art Projects, Falchok and Zimmerman are sniffing out similar aesthetic territory, fashioning a discourse that tempers inevitability and loss with possibility and wonder. Without seeming cynical or hectoring, their work steers us toward considering art as a critical instrument that embraces feeling and subjectivity as crucial to its meaning.

The debut of a new gallery that celebrates local talent is always a cause for celebration and optimism, in part because it signals the viability of a new aesthetic point of view. In this case, the cause for optimism is even greater since there is an assumption that this viewpoint has a market – that collectors and curators will support these artists and this gallery. Based on the evidence of this first show, they should.

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