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Fall gallery shows: ‘Cyber In Securities,’ ‘Silver Clouds,’ ‘This is Labor’

By Mark Jenkins, Friday, September 6, 1:28 PM

The Washington Project for the Arts’ “[Cyber In Securities](#)” should be one of the fall’s most discussed local exhibitions. But the idea for the show, at the [Pepco Edison Place Gallery](#), preceded Edward Snowden’s leaks about the National Security Agency’s surveillance programs.

“We actually finalized the artists’ list about a week before that story broke,” says curator Lisa Moren, a University of Maryland Baltimore County art professor.

The list includes more than a dozen artists who contemplate the role of information-gathering, including surveillance by intelligence and law enforcement agencies. One of the participants, in fact, has for the past 11 years publicly informed the authorities of everywhere he goes, everyone he meets and much more.

Hasan Elahi was stopped and extensively questioned at Detroit’s airport in 2002, perhaps because his name is identical or similar to someone on a government watch list. The Bangladesh-born American citizen, now an associate professor at the University of Maryland at College Park, subsequently decided to monitor himself. His Web site, [trackingtransience.net](#), reveals his current location and recent movements, and contains thousands of photos of where he’s slept, meals he’s eaten and bathrooms he’s used.

Among Elahi’s contributions to “Cyber In Securities” are a photo-painting of an “undisclosed location,” located on Google Maps, that the artist believes is former Vice President Dick Cheney’s home and a photo of a San Francisco AT&T building where the NSA allegedly maintained a secret room.

The latter piece, Moren notes, precedes Snowden’s disclosure of the extent of NSA monitoring by several years. “Information that people are saying is new has actually been out there, to my knowledge, since 2007,” she says.

“Cyber In Securities” features work by 13 artists or teams, European and Canadian as well as American. All use technology to comment on technology and its implications. New York’s Heather Dewey-Hagborg, for example, does what Moren calls “DNA surveillance.” She works with facial recognition software she wrote

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herself and does her own DNA sequencing at a DIY biotech lab in Brooklyn.

“She collects fingernails, hair, gum, cigarette butts — any human remains — that have been discarded in public places,” Moren explains. “She targets DNA code . . . for eye color, race, gender, tendency for obesity, and she cross-references that with her own face-recognition software. Once she’s done that, she’s able to make a 3D model and then produce a mask on a 3D printer.”

Some of the masks will be included in the show, highlighting both “the impulse for genetic determinism and the potential for genetic surveillance,” Moren says.

Baltimore’s Julia Kim Smith is showing prints and videos on themes of race, ethnicity and gender, as understood by Google. She types the beginning of a phrase and waits for the search engine to complete it, revealing its data-mining of mainstream curiosities.

“That has to do with Google’s goal of going from a search engine to what they call a ‘knowledge engine,’ ” Moren says. “Where they can rank content according to intent, rather than straight key-word matching.”

“The outcome . . . really points to some of the social sorting that goes on. What are the masses typing in? What we’re left with is that these thoughts of the masses constitute some sort of truth, or objective reality.”

More lyrically, veteran cyber explorer David Rokeby uses a scanner to subject everyday items to literary interpretation. “What he did was something probably no one but an artist would do,” Moren suggests. “He taught his system, which is thousands of pages of programming, by scanning works of pre-1850 literature, such as ‘Moby-Dick.’ So it looks at things like a rubber duckie and comes up with these incredibly poetic phrases.”

The Toronto artist’s project is “a little abstract in the surveillance debate,” Moren allows, “but imagine if they were not objects but people, and the person writing the algorithm had this sort of social sorting in mind. It’s a super-creative way of addressing what algorithms can do.”

Among the interactive pieces is one by Preemptive Media, a bicoastal collective that will demonstrate its own webcrawler. “They’ll have a kiosk there for the whole exhibit,” Moren says. “If you import passwords and stuff . . . they’ll tell you what’s out there about you that can be sold or distributed. And if they can acquire it, anybody can acquire it.”

“I should say,” Moren adds, “that all the data mining that they do is going to be destroyed at the end of the exhibit.”

Of course, that’s the sort of reassurance the NSA offers, too.

Cyber In Securities

On view through Sept. 27 at Pepco Edison Place Gallery, 702 Eighth St. NW. Organized by Washington Project for the Arts, 202-234-7103, www.wpadc.org

Other notable shows:

In 1964, pop artist Andy Warhol asked Bell Labs to fabricate a floating light bulb. The scientists found that they couldn’t, but the research led to the discovery of an inflatable mylar that intrigued Warhol. He and his Factory mates created pillowy shapes of silvery Scotchpak, which were exhibited in New York in 1966 as “Silver Clouds.” Since Warhol’s death, that show has been recreated in Pittsburgh and Sao Paulo, Brazil. Now it’s coming to Arlington, with 150 shiny helium- and air-filled balloons.

**Andy Warhol:
Silver Clouds**

Thursday-Oct. 20 at [Artisphere](http://www.artisphere.com), 1101 Wilson Blvd., Arlington; 703-875-1100; www.artisphere.com

Traditionally, sculpture is the most muscular of art forms, involving metal, wood and industrial tools. So it's fitting that the upcoming juried exhibition by the Washington Sculptors Group emphasizes the work in works of art. Among the 16 sculptors in the lineup are Jan Paul Acton, who hews delicacy into stone; Jeffery Cooper, whose wooden pieces combine natural and mechanical forms; and Maggie Gourlay, who integrates construction materials with softer elements.

This is Labor: Washington Sculptors Group

Sept. 18 - Oct. 20 at Kaplan Gallery, VisArts at Rockville, 155 Gibbs St., Rockville; 301-315-8200, www.visartscenter.org

Washington artist Rachel Farbiarz's solo show takes its name, from a piece featured in a group show at Heiner Contemporary last winter. Farbiarz makes drawings, mixed-media collages and installations on themes such as war, exile and remembrance. This selection considers the history and artifacts of many diverse groups, including child migrants, kamikaze pilots and Northern Ireland's Protestant marchers.

**Rachel Farbiarz:
Take Me With You**

Sept. 20 - Nov. 9 at
Heiner Contemporary, 1675
Wisconsin Ave NW; 202-338-0072; www.heinercontemporary.com

The bustling third edition of the (e)merge art fair promises 80 exhibitors showing works by more than 150 artists from 30 countries. Galleries from Austria, Belgium, Holland and Britain are returning, along with first-time participants from Germany and Italy. The art fair also provides free exhibition space to artists who aren't represented by galleries, and it presents a parking garage full of students' work and a lively schedule of performance art.

(e)merge

Oct. 3-6 at Capitol Skyline Hotel,
10 I St. SW; www.emergeartfair.com

Michael Francis Reagan's "Heart of the World" show of hand-painted maps on political, cultural and historical themes includes originals published by the New Yorker, National Geographic, the New York Times and Time-Life Books. Reagan is one of the few contemporary mapmakers who hasn't computerized his output, and his delicate watercolor-and-ink pieces are as evocative as they are informative.

Michael Francis Reagan: Heart of the World

Oct. 4-31 at Gallery A, 2106 R St. NW; 202-667-2599; www.alexgalleries.com

Jenkins is a freelance writer.

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