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ARTS & PERFORMANCE

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Playing with forms, faces, and figures

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In his show at Gallery NAGA, Nelson DaCosta offers canvases bursting with patterns and bustling with crisp, flat forms. If you haven't had your morning coffee, they'll wake you up.

DaCosta is Angolan. He was orphaned in the war there, lost his sister and his four brothers, and was shot himself. A Cuban doctor rescued him. DaCosta went to art school in Cuba, then came to Boston for his master's at Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. In May, he plans to move to New York.

The artist has two bodies of work up at NAGA. His black-and-white paintings capture the sea of humanity in biomorphic pictorial patterns. "Matrix of the Lost Land II" is a flat play of form and negative space. The black shapes are all joined, and the whole looks like the white sun glinting off black water until the black pools into faces, swaying bodies, a bird. The piece comes alive like a city square at noon.

DaCosta has been working with puzzle pieces of form and negative space for some time, and his patterns have grown more nuanced. His second body of work, sporting bold colors drifting beneath black lines, is personal.

"Luta" takes its title from the Portuguese word for war. Fierce faces like hockey masks wheel around a canvas cut with bold black strokes that sometimes describe bodies and faces in profile. "AK-47" is written across a passage of blue. "Luta" is scrawled over a small child's body. DaCosta's style, in which recognizable forms coalesce out of patterns, is full of surprises, and it holds horror with as much power as it holds hope.

There are no stems in Alice Denison's ghostly flower paintings, also at NAGA. The flowers seem to stir to life out of oppressive darkness, yet they also appear on the brink of death, plucked and spent. One of the largest works, "Prospero," features an old bouquet of yellow roses in an eerie, gray-blue atmosphere. The flowers tumble downward. The scene brings to mind Miss Havisham of Charles Dickens's "Great Expectations," who, left at the altar, stopped all the clocks in her mansion and lived out her days in her wedding dress. This would be her bouquet. The flowers, while wilting, capture the light and have an unsettling, demanding presence.

Figure photography

Howard Yezerksi Gallery has a short history of photographer Gary Schneider's figure work, featuring nudes and portraits that date back to the 1970s. The earliest pieces take a minimalist view of the body, homing in on tiny portions. "Nina Portrait Sequence II" (1975) is a series of small black-and-white images of creases, edges, and passages of skin and hair. They're clever, but dry and perfunctory beside the more expressive later work.

Schneider started taking close-cropped portraits in black and white in the late 1980s, drawing over his subjects' faces with a flashlight. Then he moved into color work, and over the years he has pushed his tones more and more. He shot nudes for a New York Times Magazine story on obesity in 2006. "Omar" was photographed while the subject snoozed, with his hand on his chest. He has a farmer's tan, and every texture on his pale chest pops — hairs, blemishes, tiny scabs. His lips and cheek are hot pink; he looks fevered and angelic.



Carl D'Alvia's "It," a sculpture that recalls a character from "The Addams Family."

The tones are similarly lurid in Schneider's most recent portraits. "Tom W." has freckles that suggest skin disease; his nose is red. The flashlight shows off his high cheekbones and brilliant blue eyes. These works haunt, marrying attention to classical beauty with a bizarre luster that both flatters and maligns.

They're naturals

"Netherworld," the feisty little group show at Judi Rotenberg Gallery put together by Beth Kantrowitz and Kathleen O'Hara, features works by artists who create natural scenes freighted with irony, history, and other cultural baggage.

Sculptor Carl D'Alvia makes furry critters in bronze and resin: "It" recalls Cousin Itt from "The Addams Family," minus the bowler hat and glasses. That's a one-liner, but his other works explore the architecture of the gallery and our tendency to project human qualities on animals. "Rat Thing" is hairier than any rat should be, and it perches on an equally hairy beam jutting from the wall, raising questions about where the animal ends and civilization begins.

Kyong Ae Kim uses traditional Korean painting techniques in her flattened landscapes. She simplifies forms and uses a solid background; cliffs are depicted in a series of lines, stylized geologic accretions. Her animals move so fast they resemble water splashing. In "Cliff 6," an unidentifiable animal frolics in a pond. The subject, more than nature, is action, even the slow action of landscapes shifting.

Video artist Julia Hechtman removes a tree from a hill, pixel by pixel, in "The Vanishing." It's sad, but as much as a comment on the environment, it's an exploration of erasure, the traces it leaves behind, and the after-effect on the eye of what was once there.

NETHERWORLD: Carl D'Alvia, Julia Hechtman, Kyong Ae Kim
At: Judi Rotenberg Gallery,
130 Newbury St., through Feb. 6.
617-437-1518,
www.judirotenberg.com