

Overlookable works shouldn't be missed

BY MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN

The art at the Arlington Arts Center announces its presence with a whisper, not a scream. In fact, when you walk in the door, things are so quiet, visually speaking, that you might look around and wonder, "Where did all the art go?"

Leah Cooper — one of five talented artists selected by a panel of judges for the center's annual "Spring Solos" exhibition — has the building's atrium all to herself. Her name's right there on the wall. You can't miss it.

Her art, on the other hand? You just might.

Part of the region's installation-art boom, Cooper works with the most minimalist of materials: faint pencil drawings on the wall, bits of plexiglass and mirror, gaffer's tape. The result: It almost looks as though a contractor had come by to hang something, taken a few measurements and then left without finishing. A few mirrors lie scattered about, along with small sheets of plexiglass affixed to the wall. Bits of tape and graphite crisscross the atrium's white walls, like cryptic carpenter's marks.

Called "Problematizing the Liminal," Cooper's installation is all about the act of noticing. For the artist, the atrium is a kind of found object. By drawing attention to its forgotten angles and corners, its play of light and shadow, she turns up the volume on the architecture's sweet, soundless music.

Travis Head has a similarly light touch. Although the artist's work includes sculpture and photography, his most comfortable medium seems to be drawing. Head's solo show includes sketchbooklike drawings (as well as photographs of drawings) of things the artist has seen, read, owned or used, along with handwritten captions. Most of them are so microscopic that I found myself wishing the gallery had provided a magnifying glass.

That tool wouldn't be out of place. Like Cooper's installation, Head's art — which he refers to as a kind of souvenir-keeping — invites close, one might almost say obsessive, looking.

Photographer Michael Borek works in a more conventional vein. Shot during several visits to a defunct and now abandoned lace factory in Scranton, Pa. — a once-thriving business that, after 105 years, fell victim to automation in 2002 — Borek's photos of stilled machines show us what's there: the beauty of decay. But they also bear silent witness to something that can't be seen — or described — as easily.

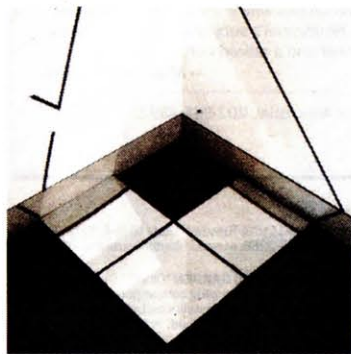
Sculptor Emily Hermant's bentwood abstractions, which she calls "spatial drawings," function in a way that's close to Cooper's brand of artmaking. To be sure, Hermant's technique is less subtle and more solidly three-dimensional. Two of her three pieces are eight feet tall, and all of them incorporate extravagantly wavelike ribbons of lumber, which the artist painstakingly hand-bends, then clamps together with the kind of hardware you'd pick up at Home Depot.

Despite their material, they're as lithe and leanly muscled as ballet dancers.



MICHAEL BOREK

Michael Borek's photos, above, were shot at an abandoned lace factory in Scranton, Pa., that shuttered in 2002. Below left, Leah Cooper's installation draws attention to the forgotten angles and corners of the atrium at the Arlington Arts Center.



FROM ARLINGTON ARTS CENTER

But they're more than handsome objects. Like Cooper's wall drawings — like any good art, really — Hermant's sculptures activate the space they're in, along with our perception of it.

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SPRING SOLOS 2012

Through June 10 at the Arlington Arts Center, 3550 Wilson Blvd., Arlington (Metro: Virginia Square). 703-248-6800. www.arlingtonartscenter.org.

Hours: Wednesday-Friday from 1 to 7 p.m., Saturday and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m.

Admission: Free.

Public program: On May 19 from 3 to 5 p.m., the artists will talk about their work.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORK

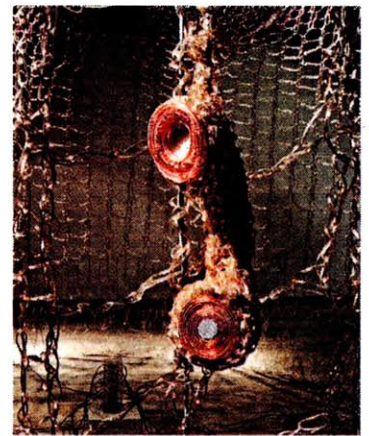
Bring a friend (or two) when you visit "Spring Solos." Emily Biondo's interactive artwork "The Telephone Game" works best with multiple players.

As the name implies, "The Telephone Game" — a hanging, cage-like structure made from a web of crocheted speaker wire connected through a central-nervous-system-like hub of amps — incorporates seven phones. The floppy handsets are also made from crocheted speaker wire; the innards were bought from a wholesaler of phone components used in prison visiting rooms.

Although the instructions say the piece can be used by one to seven people, a single visitor picking up a line will hear only white noise. Multiple participants are needed to experience the full effect, which involves a range of what the artist calls "communication, miscommunication and noncommunication."

Depending on which phone you pick up, you might or might not be able to have a normal conversation. Four handsets are connected in pairs, making two standard phone connections. The other three handsets are on a separate circuit, connected sequentially to form a round robin, like the children's game of "telephone," so that the person you're talking to can hear only you but speaks to someone else, who reports back to you.

As social sculpture, it's intriguing,



GREG STALEY

Emily Biondo's "The Telephone Game," made from a web of crocheted speaker wire, works best with multiple players.

especially as a commentary on the state of today's hyperconnected yet disengaged world. The fact that it's also confusing and occasionally disorienting is not a glitch of the piece, Biondo says, but a feature. "We treat awkwardness as abnormality," she explains, "when it pretty much makes up the majority of our day."

— Michael O'Sullivan