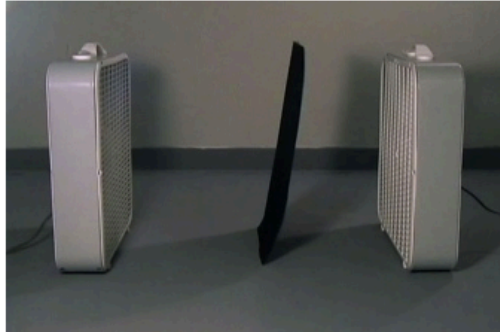


STRANGE MAGIC

Group show is both entertaining and bewitching



Jean Alexander Frater's "Oh . . . This Could Go on Forever!"

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Strange Magic

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Strange Magic, **Guest Spot gallery's** newest exhibition, is above all, playful. Details about the four artists in the show are presented on origami hand puppets rather than on regular sheets of paper, for instance. (Some may remember these grade-school fixtures as "cootie catchers.") And many of the pieces have a very specific frame of reference: The viewer must crouch down and peer through a hole to see a piece or go outside and circle around a lamppost or

scan the gallery space for something hidden. Often, the effect is indeed magical. Curated by local artist Skye Gilkerson, the exhibition is meant to showcase artists who "challenge reality through interventions to everyday life, shift perspectives through adaptations to architecture and space, and question what is malleable by attempting transformations of the self."

The first piece that catches your eye when you enter is "Learning to write with my left hand," a 6-foot-square raw canvas completely covered in handwriting, by Chicago-based artist Jean Alexander Frater. The writing begins as if the canvas were a page and progresses in dense uneven lines all the way to the bottom, where it trails off. Anyone who has written down their private thoughts, whether in a journal or as an exercise in stream-of-consciousness, will recognize the shifts in tone, the experimentation—like the titular attempt at writing with the non-dominant hand—and even the tendency toward self-berating. "Enough already! Need to stick with one thing in order to be taken seriously," one random line reads. The words are vulnerable and clearly spontaneous, and thus mesmerizing. But to focus on just one line is to disrespect the whole, a mammoth personal process turned public artifact.

Nearly half the pieces in the show are text-based—perhaps a predilection of Gilkerson's, who has used text in her own work. One of the most charming is James Johnson's "14K Sentences on Conceptual Art." The piece consists of conceptual artist Sol Lewitt's famous 35 "Sentences on Conceptual Art" printed onto a slightly warped sheet of 14-karat gold. The viewer cannot read them without seeing his or her own distorted, funhouse-mirror reflection, which adds a level of humor and depth to the words. Number 20 particularly resonates—"Successful art changes our understanding of the conventions by altering our perceptions"—as does number 35: "These sentences comment on art, but are not art." In this context, of course, they have become art.

Ecuadorian artist Oscar Santillan's work perhaps best fits the stated theme of the show. His "Twelve Water Drops" is a large photograph that at first seems like a clipping from a nature magazine. It is a closeup of a spider in its web on an evergreen tree. The spider appears to be rolling or otherwise manipulating a drop of dew as large as itself. But the drop is part of a perfect circle of a dozen droplets. Did the dew really form in such a geometric fashion? Did the spider create the circle? Both seem unlikely, but the viewer is left to wonder.

Santillan also produced a piece with fellow artist Ander Mikalson, "T.H.Y.," an artifact of which appears in the exhibition. In making the piece, Santillan and Mikalson "conspired to introduce fiction into each other's everyday lives." By working through family members and friends, the artists were able to orchestrate scripted actions that affected one another. A stranger makes repeated phone calls to one artist, a drawing appears inside the sandwich of the other. In *Strange Magic*, panels on the wall feature each artist's guesses about what actions the other one orchestrated. These range from "Stole my toothbrush" to "Put a small piece of paper in my bag with a drawing of a nose coming out of a wacky shoe." The piece is captivating in part because neither the viewer nor the participants know which actions were, in fact, part of the game and which had some other cause or were the result of circumstance, ordinary magic.

D.C. artist Jassie Rios also flirts with the allure of mystery in her "Container Walk," a mesmerizing video shot with an iPhone, a pull toy, and a discarded food container. The resulting watercolor blur is a bit like what you might see if you were lying on the back seat of a fast-moving car, with an oblique view through a window. When the video occasionally slows—presumably because the person with the camera slows down—it's clear we are in Baltimore: rowhouses loom and, briefly, the familiar Smyth Jewelers billboard in Station North featuring the Natty Boh and Utz mascots appears. The video is disorienting, frustrating, and oddly affecting, perhaps because the viewer has so little sense of control.

Strange Magic is, in short, an enchanting show. The combined effect of the pieces described here and the others in the exhibition leave one with a sense of wonder and that slight psychic shift that makes ordinary objects seem suddenly crackling with meaning and possibility.