

The Washington Post

In the galleries: An invitation to step inside the internet



An installation view of Amy Schissel's "Auto-Bio-Geographies" at VisArts. Included in the exhibit is "Hyper Atlas," an attempt to depict the internet. (Gregory R Staley Photography)

Review by Mark Jenkins

December 23, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EST

An unreadable map of an overwhelmingly complex reality, Amy Schissel's "Hyper Atlas" is an attempt to depict the internet in ink, charcoal, pencil and paint. Fittingly, the room-spanning centerpiece of the artist's "Auto-Bio-Geographies" combines hand-drawn and machine-generated lines. The massive picture on display in VisArts's Gibbs Street Gallery is rendered primarily in steely shades of black and gray, but punctuated by dots and dashes of colored pencil. The drawing is "infused with information friction," says the Miami-based Canadian artist's statement.

The fanciful schematic has both figurative and actual depths. It includes digital prints that are collaged into the whole and then partly painted over, as well as drawn and painted details that

appear to float above, or sink beneath, the heavily worked surface. White ribbons curl across the composition, their free forms in contrast to the tightly overlapping circles produced by a mechanical plotter. Rays emanate from a black hole near the piece's center, suggesting a single origin point that many of the other details sprawlingly contradict.

If this isn't literally what the web looks like, it does evoke what electronic hyperconnectivity *feels* like. The picture is overwhelming yet intimate, confoundingly involved yet spangled with bursts of illumination. Schissel's metaverse is too flat to be entered, but nonetheless beckons the viewer in.

While Schissel gives impersonal architecture a subjective feel, two other artists exhibiting at VisArts anchor their multimedia work in autobiography. Baltimore-based Sughra Hussainy recounts her own saga using traditional art techniques learned in her native Afghanistan. Rex Delafkaran, a Washingtonian, uses video and sculpture to express what her statement calls "my Iranian American queer identity."

Most of the works in Hussainy's Common Ground Gallery show, "Are We in the Story or Is the Story in Us," are derived from her manuscript about her life, illustrated in the style of classical Persian miniatures. Serene moments alternate with scenes of war, represented by such symbols as an airborne military drone and a lion with explosives strapped to its torso. Some pieces are collaborations with Hussainy's brother or other relatives. A photo of the exultant artist upon graduation from art school was turned into a embroidered tapestry completed by three women after they fled to Pakistan. One of the two videos observes Hussainy's black-clad niece, an aspiring artist, sitting at an antique sewing machine that symbolizes the Taliban-decreed return of women to traditional roles. In broadening her memoir to include her extended family, Hussainy has made it richer and darker.

The ingredients of "Hot Crop," Delafkaran's Concourse Gallery show, include video, ceramics and the verse of Rumi, the 13th-century Persian-language mystic poet. There's also an unexpected element: heat. Three of the assemblages incorporate electric warmers of various kinds, including one that dangles threateningly over four beeswax tongues that, according to the piece's title, have "very little to say."

Video screens display the artist in performance, using such props as a cinder block (representing the construction of identity) and a Persian carpet. Many of the references are private, and indeed Delafkaran seems uncertain about the possibility of wider discourse. "Mistranslation and Beauty" consists of words translated by computer software from Farsi to English and back again, rendered in faint text and edged in orange spray paint. The words are central yet nearly indecipherable, a visual metaphor for mystery and miscommunication.

Amy Schissel: Auto-Bio-Geographies; Sughra Hussainy: Are We in the Story or Is the Story in Us; and Rex Delafkaran: Hot Crop Through Jan. 8 at [VisArts](https://www.visarts.org/), 155 Gibbs St., Rockville.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2022/12/23/art-gallery-shows-dc-area/>