

Neighborhood Art Exhibits Not to Miss: The Ralls Collection

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David Richardson's powerful series of large abstract paintings commemorating the artist's aesthetic absorption of the ancient world's "The Trojan War Series" — now on view at Georgetown's Ralls Collection through January 29th — have an air of constructed materiality, as though they were not simply paint on canvas but rather stone panels from the very walls of the besieged Greek city of Troy itself.

Richardson's compositional skills, his brilliant color palette, and his alternating solids and drips conjure up among the picture elements in these works the blood and tears oozing over the surfaces of these panel-like wall fragments — until bleeding out well below the city's pictorial ramparts. There is a muscularity to these paintings, with their almost brutal geometric forms tempered by a delicacy of coloring whose gentleness serves to tamp down the terrifying realities projected by these images of war and physical destruction — abstract through these images may be.

There is a vibrant tension among the pictorial elements of these paintings and their overall composition — as well there should be. Homer's re-telling of the Trojan War saga in *The Iliad* is the western literary canon's foundation revenge tragedy. This misconceived war to avenge an allegedly abducted great beauty — Helen, with "the face that launched a thousand ships," in Christopher Marlowe's immortal words, and who was actually, wrote Herodotus, alive and well in Egypt of her own accord — tragically culminated in the wrath of Achilles.

This wrath served to destroy both Hector and Achilles, when Achilles slays and desecrates Hector's body in revenge for Hector having killed Achilles' lover and companion in war — Patroclus — in an act of mistaken identity, Patroclus having donned Achilles



Calchas II, from "The Trojan War Series."

well known suit of armor to join in the desperate fighting. Achilles in turn is slain — his death foretold him by the gods — reminding Homer of the Greek maxim that "Ares is just and kills those who kill." Both the famous and the lesser known of these Greeks and Trojans, including Hecuba's tears, inspire these masterful paintings, whose abstractions encompass a world of immediately engaging emotional, visual, and narrative meanings.

Works from two smaller suites of paintings follow those of "The Trojan War Series." The first of these, "The Expatriate" series, could be called the conflicting directions series. It features forces in combat in a chaos of abstract, symbolic, and realistic forms. Penetrating symbols are cast against planes, solids, and voids. Arrows and sharp points, together with pendulums and bomb- or missile-like protuberances are set off in four-part, nine-part, and other numbers of panels or grids arrayed as though in conflict against each other. Richardson's color palette becomes grimmer, inspired, he says, by the reds, blacks, and grays — separated at times by harsh and discordant muddy astels — of Seoul, South Korea's urban streetscape, one that never sleeps.

His second suite, titled "Series R," seems more to reflect a more purely religious or spiritual aesthetic. Here the panel constructions project a more tightly focused, serene compositional completeness. Crosses and orbs bound, with Richardson's gloriously simplified painting R No. 14 presenting the cruciform symbol over a bleeding heart-style orb — an extraordinary creation.

There is much, much more to be seen in this important show by this artist of many talents. David Richardson is also a career U.S. Marine officer who has seen service in Iraq and a sometime War College and university lecturer. He is also well traveled, especially in the Far East. His absorption of this knowledge and emotional experience and its transformation onto painterly canvases is a tour de force.