

# Washington, DC Art News

Art news, information, gallery openings, commentary, criticism, happenings, opportunities, and everything associated with helping to spread the word about the visual arts scene in and all around the great metropolitan capital of the United States of America.

## Archives

10/01/2003 -  
10/31/2003  
11/01/2003 -  
11/30/2003  
12/01/2003 -  
12/31/2003  
01/01/2004 -  
01/31/2004  
02/01/2004 -  
02/29/2004  
03/01/2004 -  
03/31/2004  
04/01/2004 -  
04/30/2004  
05/01/2004 -  
05/31/2004  
06/01/2004 -  
06/30/2004  
07/01/2004 -  
07/31/2004  
08/01/2004 -  
08/31/2004  
09/01/2004 -  
09/30/2004  
10/01/2004 -  
10/31/2004  
11/01/2004 -  
11/30/2004  
12/01/2004 -  
12/31/2004  
01/01/2005 -  
01/31/2005  
02/01/2005 -  
02/28/2005  
03/01/2005 -  
03/31/2005  
04/01/2005 -  
04/30/2005  
05/01/2005 -  
05/31/2005  
06/01/2005 -  
06/30/2005  
07/01/2005 -  
07/31/2005  
08/01/2005 -  
08/31/2005  
09/01/2005 -  
09/30/2005  
10/01/2005 -  
10/31/2005  
11/01/2005 -  
11/30/2005  
12/01/2005 -  
12/31/2005  
01/01/2006 -  
01/31/2006  
02/01/2006 -  
02/28/2006  
03/01/2006 -  
03/31/2006  
04/01/2006 -  
04/30/2006  
05/01/2006 -  
05/31/2006  
06/01/2006 -  
06/30/2006  
07/01/2006 -  
07/31/2006  
08/01/2006 -  
08/31/2006

## My Stuff

About Me  
Art Deals of the  
Week  
Email Me  
Our Galleries  
[XML](#)

## DC Art Links

DCARTNEWS  
Site Feed  
Adrian  
Parsons  
Alexandra  
Silverthorne  
Angstbabe  
Art at The  
Katzen  
Art DC  
Art Deals of the  
Week  
Art in the City  
Art Dealers  
Association of  
Greater  
Washington  
ArtlinePlus

Monday, May 29, 2006

### Cristin Millett at Arlington Arts Center

Considering that **Jessica Dawson** wrote that *"I regret to report that almost all of the six solo shows filling Arlington Arts Center are underwhelming"* when she visited the **Arlington Arts Center** recently, I wasn't really expecting an artistic epiphany during my recent visit to see Nestor Hernandez's portraits of Cuban-Americans currently on exhibition on the lower level of the center.

Wrong!

The visit to the **Arlington Arts Center** unexpectedly revealed one of the most memorable art installations that I have ever seen, and even though critics often have different opinions, I am honestly puzzled that Dawson didn't mention the amazing installation in the main floor gallery.

I am referring to Cristin Millett's astounding solo show at the **Center**.

Not being familiar with Millett's work, I asked the Center's hardworking director Claire Huschle, to tell me a bit about both the artist and the installation. I then stepped back and listened as Claire smartly dissected and explained the installation and commented on it (and then I realized why **Jessica** missed it completely! -- *"listening"* being the operative word here).

*"She grew in a medical household,"* explained Huschle, as we walked into the installation. This revelation (I believe) is the key to understanding (and appreciating) Millett's work; forgive my using the critic's crutch and let me describe it for you.

The installation consists of a maze like circular corridor titled *"Teatro Anatomico"* which uses Andre Levret's 18th century schematic representations of the female reproductive system at the time of conception.

Millett has reproduced them into chiffon sheets that hang from aluminum tubing that form the maze and deliver a very convincing impression of both a hospital setting and a surgical theater, set-up in uterine forms that lead to a central point.

There's a certain and strange Victorian parlor elegance to this first part of the installation, and the technical skill is admirable, both in the hand stitching of the lady-like chiffon and the construction of the aluminum tubing.



Millett has realistically constructed a convincing anatomical theatre with a subtle nuance of the female reproductive system (even the Victorian lighting seems like a female vagina when viewed from the outside); we are entering a medical theatre, where anatomy students, erotica voyeurs, and art observers all meld into one.

Inside the maze, a cleverly constructed medical exam table depicts the living digital image of a young woman's body, except its face which is replaced by a living digital plasm.

Titled *"Abdominal Mystery: Dissection of the Observer,"* this is a living, breathing video, where we see the anonymous body breathing, being dissected, wrapped in plastic (I think), explored and manipulated.

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voyeur is fascinated, titillated and sometimes repulsed. The Eros of the nude body is coupled with the grossness of the exploration of its insides and the magic of its fragility. The body has become a bridge of sorts between the interior and exterior spaces of architectural entryway provided by the uterine maze: are we entering the theatre, or penetrating it?

The metaphorical relationship can be overwhelmingly sexual, or perhaps an intelligent attempt to place the female body as a comment on its visual power in a *Sexual Personae* Camille Paglia sort of way?

And therein lies the unexpected success of this piece, which belongs in a museum where it can be admired, explored and discussed: It brings the viewer into a silent interaction with a work of art that employs the most powerful of human icons: our body.

Millett is a **young artist on the faculty at Penn State**, and if this installation is a sign of things to come, then keep an eye on this promising artist.

And were our museum curators like their counterparts in New York or LA or Seattle or SF, this piece would find a champion (and a home) in one of our area's great museums.

This is my call for Anne Ellegood or Kerry Brougner from the Hirshhorn or Jonathan Binstock from the Corcoran to pay a visit to Arlington and see the newborn that this young brilliant artist has delivered for us.

The exhibition goes through June 10, 2006.

**Update:** The *Washington Post's Express* has a little blurb on this review in the Tuesday, May 30, 2006 issue.

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