

*By Jessica Dawson*

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### **Washington Women Artists At Osuna**

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A highly selective group of works by the region's better-known female artists hangs in Bethesda's Osuna Gallery. Longtime dealer Ramon Osuna chose the 32 artists on view using highly personal criteria: They are artists he's shown over the years, associates and friends of those artists, and artists recommended by dealers he respects.

The resulting show functions something like a yearbook -- one work represents each artist. Many of the pieces are recent efforts, though a few were made decades ago. There is no effort to capture any particular moment in District artmaking, nor is there a focus to the variety of media on view. The result is a disjointed and difficult-to-navigate exhibition, one that illustrates the limitations of building a show solely around the sex of its makers.

A few themes do emerge. One is female artists grappling with modernism. Nan Montgomery offers a large-scale canvas that answers the austerity of Barnett Newman's famous "zips" -- the long lines of paint that intersected his paintings vertically. Montgomery's vertical line begins as an abstract line near the bottom of her canvas and morphs into the long stem of a flower near the top. Likewise, Francie Hester works in abstracted forms on aluminum panel that speak to both Robert Rauschenberg and the encaustic panels of District artist Robin Rose.

The female body plays an important role here, too. Annette Polan produces a self-portrait that playfully straddles painting and sculpture even as it evokes the history of self-portraiture, Marcel Duchamp and femininity. Yuriko Yamaguchi offers a bronze work that appears to be an oversized shriveled fruit but turns out to be the sum of so many small breasts.

Two male nudes in the exhibition turn the conceit of their female counterpart on its head. Manon Cleary combines portraiture's capacity to bring out a sitter's personality with an object lesson in the male body in her late-1970s oil portrait "Big J." Bernis von zur Muehlen offers a twist: She's posed a naked man on studio cloths in the tradition of an odalisque. Yet the man she's chosen must be in his late 70s or 80s -- every wrinkled imperfection is in full view.

*Washington Women in the Arts: A Selection*, at Osuna Art, 7200 Wisconsin Ave., Bethesda, Tuesday-Saturday noon-5 p.m., 301-654-4500, to Jan. 5; <http://www.osunagallery.com>.