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In the galleries

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By Mark Jenkins

Alchemical Vessels

In its three previous years, Joan Hisaoka Healing Arts Gallery's "Alchemical Vessels" asked artists to repurpose a bowl, an object whose shape and purpose evoke the ceremonial. For 2016, the gallery switched to a cigar box, a clunkier foundation. But then the goal is transformation, and most of the 123 contributors hid, disguised or significantly altered the container. A few even destroyed it. Naoko Wowsugi smashed, Nehemiah Dixon III burned and Charles Jean Pierre perforated until the ordinary carton became something fragile and even lacy.

Only two of the participants didn't employ an actual cigar box, which shows that artists, as a group, follow the rules more often than might be expected.

A box, like a bowl, can be a world in miniature. Margo Elsayd designed a reading room, complete with one of those tiny reading lights. Helen Zughaib constructed a bedroom, outfitted with dollhouse furniture. Elaine Langerman installed a nest for creatures who might actually fit inside such a box.

Many of the artists simply put their customary styles and concerns in or on a box. Patrick J Burns directly addresses the effects of smoking, arraying cigarettes that drip a tar-like substance. Ulysses Marshall ditched the box in favor of a larger, coffin-shaped form covered in graffiti and primitivist pictures. Rita Elsner also ponders death, but more gently; she made a box of and for pencils, filled with used drawing implements that belonged to the late Manon Cleary, one of D.C.'s best-loved artists.



Rita Elsner. "Hear/not Here," on view at the Joan Hisoka Healing Arts Gallery. (Tom Wolff/Joan Hisaoka Healing Arts Gallery)

Alchemical Vessels 2016 On view through May 6 at Joan Hisaoka Healing Arts Gallery, 1632 U St. NW. 202-483-8600. www.smithcenter.org/arts-healing/joan-hisaoka-art-gallery.html.