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Art Color & Meaning Knit Together in An Abstract Yarn

By [Blake Gopnik](#)
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A lovely two-artist show that opened last week at the tiny Transformer gallery near Logan Circle looks into one of the main ideas of 20th-century art: that abstract beauty could be distilled from everyday objects. And it shows how, despite that distillation, the gorgeous art that results always keeps its everydayness, too.

The works at Transformer seem to be about abstract pattern and color rendered in mundane materials such as bedsheets and yarn. But in fact, those materials themselves are as significant as the abstraction they serve.

They also marry perfectly with Transformer's scruffy, tenement-room space, making this perhaps the six-year-old nonprofit's most successful installation yet.

One side of the gallery is filled with work by Valerie Molnar, a 25-year-old artist from Richmond. She takes peculiar patches and panels of hand knitting, then nails them up across the wall to form a brightly colored abstract composition. Which means the piece isn't abstract at all: Molnar's knitting inevitably comes stuffed with evocations of Mom's acrylic potholders, of your first attempt to make a sweater and of abandoned summer projects discovered at a rummage sale. Every curve in this abstraction evokes an armhole, each pucker is a gusset, every straight line is selvage. Grandmom's mysterious injunction to "knit one, purl one" echoes through the gallery. The whole thing speaks of our handmade past.

Of course, Molnar's composition also speaks of the past of art, especially in Washington. Its mod stripes and almost psychedelic swoops -- there are moments that come close to Peter Max and images from "Yellow Submarine" -- mimic some of the more flamboyant moments in 1960s color field painting, a movement that this city briefly made its own. Molnar's bright acrylic yarn stands for the new acrylic paints that '60s artists used; the texture of her knitting evokes the all-over strokes of an abstractionist's brush, or a close-up on the weave of unprimed canvas.



"If Your Love Were a Grain of Sand, Mine Would Be a Universe of Oceans" is part of Valerie Molnar's hand-knit installation at Transformer. (By Marissa Long -- Transformer)

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The color field movement insisted on canvases that appealed only and directly to the eyes, and that avoided making any reference to things outside themselves. Molnar's hand-knit mural at Transformer is plenty visual, and plenty appealing. But it also makes clear that almost any visual effect, especially if it's notably appealing, is likely to have meaning that transcends what it looks like.

Back in the 1970s, my grandmother's apartment in Philadelphia was hung with her own needlepoint renditions of op art paintings. Molnar's knitting,

installed among the ancient, paint-encrusted moldings and baseboards of Transformer's space, is a kind of [Jackson Pollock](#) version of such domestic decoration: It's grandly improvisational, mimicking the scale and ambition of great American abstraction, but it's got the one-stitch-at-a-time good manners of traditional "women's work."

Where Molnar's installation feels like great painting infected with domesticity, Mariah Johnson, who just turned 29 and is based in Los Angeles, makes "sculpture" that seems to have come directly from a linen cupboard. It seems less planned and composed than found out in the world, then transported to a context where it can function as art.

Johnson fills Transformer's bay window with tidy piles of secondhand sheeting, in softly faded greens and blues. She decorates a nearby Pepco meter and its electrical conduits with stacked pillowcases in slightly brighter tones. A closet's worth of flowered linens gets draped, maypole-like, around the gallery's main supporting column.

In her artist's statement, Johnson tells us that "the interactions among color combinations, printed patterns and folding systems become visually engrossing and reference abstract and minimalist paintings," and that is perfectly true. But she also cites the influence of a mother who "wants her linen closet to be beautiful when she opens the door."

Stacked in Transformer's street-front window, Johnson's linens also reference retail display, and an almost sad-sack attempt to jazz up a big pile of used sheets. Her installation feels like something the volunteers at Goodwill might dream up to brighten their linen department. But because it feels like that, it ends up meaning more, not less, than it would as pure abstraction.

Molnar and Johnson's show, which is the final installment in an exhibition titled "Here & Now," runs through June 14 at Transformer, 1404 P St. NW. It is open Wednesday-Saturday 1-7 p.m. Call 202-483-1102 or visit <http://www.transformergallery.org>.

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