

IN THE GALLERIES

Painter brings masterful skill to worlds from his imagination

BY MARK JENKINS

In the earliest of the seven paintings in Erik Thor Sandberg's "Strange Attractors," a skeleton holds one end of an old man's long beard, atop of which is perched a tiny city of red buildings. Not all the D.C. neoclassical painter's visions are urban, but each depicts a miniature place that's distinctive and self-contained. The most recent pictures in the Connersmith show portray planetlike worlds, roughly spherical and teeming with human and animal life.

Sandberg describes himself as a "narrative artist," but he's not telling stories people already know, like the biblical or mythological tales illustrated by the 15th- and 16th-century painters whose techniques he emulates. Each parable is invented from scratch and reflects the artist's personal concerns and private symbols. These are rendered with consummate skill in a style that melds those of Italian and Dutch masters.

Five paintings, all large squares with black backgrounds, acutely juxtapose life and loss. They feature nude women — sensuous, vital and timeless — alongside such symbolic creatures as an owl (traditionally signifying wisdom) and a headless serpent coiled in a loop (expressing infinity). Two of the planetoids are made of bone, suggesting death; another pair are translucent bowls or spheres filled with fluid, perhaps amniotic. The last is a clump of tree trunks, woody but arranged in a configuration that resembles a human heart. In Sandberg's fantastical compositions, body and environment nearly meld while eternity and mortality diverge.

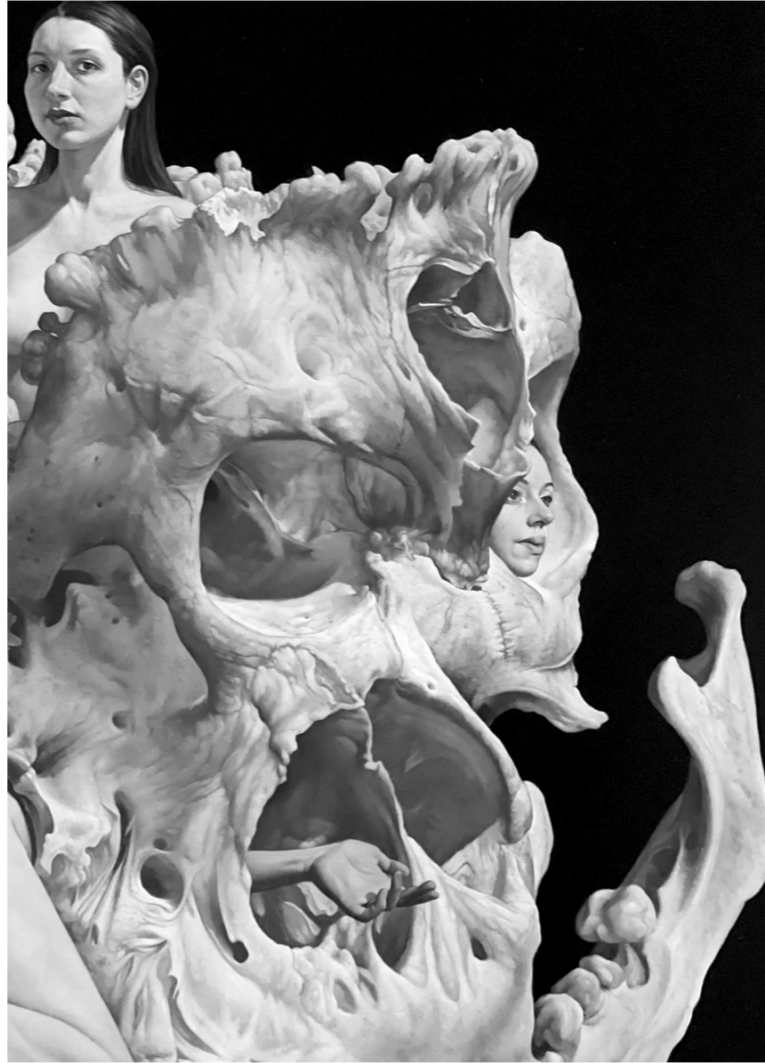
Erik Thor Sandberg: Strange Attractors
Through March 22 at Connersmith, 1013 O St. NW, connersmith.us.com. 202-588-8750.

It Depends

From the ways they shimmer and undulate, Jenny Wu's painting-sculpture hybrids appear to be delicate. But an unexpected aspect of the artist's creations is divulged by one of her characteristically whimsical titles: "Work Out So Hopefully I Can Be Strong Enough to Carry My Paintings." The assemblages in Wu's Morton Fine Art show, "It Depends," are made from thick multiple coats of latex paint that have been poured, dried and then cut into pieces. The resulting artworks are as heavy in weight as they are light in effect.

Wu has been refining her method for years, building mosaics of paint shards atop surfaces whose contrasting colors are visible through gaps, usually but not always tiny. This show includes some unfamiliar formats, including a hexagonal construction whose earth-toned strands fit together like fibers woven into a basket. But the most notable development is a newfound cohesion in the work of the China-born artist, a Washingtonian who is currently a visiting assistant professor at Trinity College in Connecticut.

Where Wu's style used to emphasize small chunks of multicolored, multilayered paint, her new work more often consists of horizontally aligned strips. These are sometimes organized in rainbow-like gradations but more often stretch across the picture in a manner that hints at landscape paintings. (They don't



ERIK THOR SANDBERG/CONNERSMITH