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## ‘Turf and Terrain’ at Arts in Foggy Bottom, Reviewed

An outdoor sculpture biennial in Foggy Bottom has no right to be as good as this one does.



“Foggy Bottom Microobservatory” by Benjamin Andrew (2016)

“Turf and Terrain,” Foggy Bottom’s 2016 outdoor sculpture biennial, makes the case for a program that shouldn’t work. An outdoor sculpture biennial means pieces that can weather the outdoors. A Foggy Bottom outdoor sculpture biennial means work that has to find its context in Foggy Bottom. That’s two strikes against it.

Yet “Turf and Terrain” assembles several works that would shine in any show. For the first time in this program’s eight-year history (this is the fifth iteration of the biennial), performance and interactivity are as central to the proceedings as big hulking works in metal. Danielle O’Steen, the curator of the

exhibit, has pulled off something unlikely: an outdoor sculpture show that's light materially and hefty conceptually.

Consider "Fog" (2016), a performance (that's right: a performance in a sculpture biennial) by Eames Armstrong. Three times over the course of the exhibit, Armstrong is painting text onto the brick sidewalks of Foggy Bottom using water. It's a departure for Armstrong, whose performances can involve lots of elements, from stick-and-poke tattoos to neon bulbs; "Fog" is simple in the mode of Yoko Ono.

Benjamin Andrew's "Foggy Bottom Microobservatory" (2016), the standout in this show, also features a performance component. The piece involves a pair of microscopes erected like viewing stations around an industrial-looking plinth. Through an attendant website, Andrew claims to be making fermented foods and drinks using yeast and bacteria cultivated from the area. While a Foggy Bottom kombucha may or may not be in the offing, the multi-media performance is convincing, anchored in a physical structure that serves as a science station. The artist has already hosted one workshop at the lab on making natural sodas, breads, and beers.

Other works in "Turf and Terrain" play directly on their surrounding contexts, including Nicole Herbert's "Building Blocks" (2016), a site-specific piece situated in somebody's yard. Her piece rhymes the bricks of the rowhouse with bricks cast in cement and plaster (and also plain brick) arranged in straight-ahead, as-you-like rows. It's a post-minimalist gesture that works a bit like the sculpture of John Ruppert, a longtime University of Maryland hand. Becky Borlan's "Bricks" (2016) also zeroes in on context: Her piece is an acrylic wall painted like brick. It looks like a tacky filter for the home behind it.

There's room for traditional sculpture in this sculpture biennial, although Lisa Dillin's rust-colored "Equivalent Formations V" (2016) might be the only piece in the show that gives off a truly public-sculpture vibe. Other works are practically ceremonial, such as Jonathan Monaghan's "Agnus Dei After Zurbaran" (2015) a laser-cut marble sculpture modeled after a lamb in a 1635 painting by Francisco de Zurbarán. Lindsay Pichaske's "Kingdom" (2016) is subtle and subversive: It's a realistic sculpture of a deer that could easily be confused for a decorative lawn ornament.

O'Steen has almost entirely eschewed abstract sculpture, which is a welcome departure from past shows in this series. Dillin's boxy planters or Rob Hackett's "Step Right Up" (2016), a stair-step deck oriented like a carefully tilted piece of debris in one Foggy Bottom yard, come the closest to well-worn traditions in public sculpture established by David Smith or Mark di Suvero or the like. Patrick McDonough's "Adaptation Terrarium: Moringa" (2016) is about as far as outdoor art gets from the moody metal icons favored by sculpture gardens. The cerebral piece almost begs for a white-cube context, but in fact, McDonough's structure is an intervention in the environment: a greenhouse that makes it possible to grow a moringa seedling that otherwise wouldn't thrive in Foggy Bottom.

Residential and tucked away, Foggy Bottom might strike most D.C. residents as a place where art doesn't grow. And indeed, past editions of the neighborhood's public sculpture series trended correspondingly toward the inert and inoffensive. (With some exceptions, namely the 2014 biennial, which produced an outstanding work by Mariah Anne Johnson.) With "Turf and Terrain," however, O'Steen has prioritized the biennial aspect of the effort by merely taking the suggestion of outdoor sculpture under advisement.

At Arts in Foggy Bottom to Oct. 22. Between 24th and 26th streets NW, and H and K streets NW. Free. [artsinfoggybottom.com](http://artsinfoggybottom.com)