

art review

An East Baltimore balancing act

Two artists' disparate yet complementary work illuminates neighborhoods

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Forget the glitzy attractions along the Harbor East waterfront. If you want a real sense of East Baltimore, check out *The Rumors Are True*: Megan Hildebrandt & Christine Sajecki, a new exhibit at the Creative Alliance at the Patterson.

With paintings, photographs and other media, artists Hildebrandt and Sajecki offer different takes on the same East Baltimore neighborhoods, based on their tenure as resident artists at the Creative Alliance. The result is an endearing and illuminating show — sometimes whimsical, sometimes sobering — that just may tell you more than you ever wanted to know about Charm City (like, what does that roving Taste Freeze truck really deliver at 3 a.m.).

The most novel hook is the section featuring Hildebrandt and her quasi-anthropological campaign to learn about and clean up East Baltimore, one marble step at a time. For much of last year, she roamed the streets of Highlandtown, offering to scrub residents' steps as a way to preserve a fading Baltimore tradition. Inspired by a 1948 photo by former Sun photographer A. Aubrey Bodine, the Michigan native, 34, donned a 1940s-era housewife dress and apron and went door to door, asking whoever answered, "Do your steps?" If they consented, she took her bucket and brush and went to work, the way legions of housewives did in the 1940s but rarely do today. She also documented her work, sometimes getting the beneficiaries of her elbow-grease generosity to snap her photo, making them part of her "performance art" (Think Margaret Mead and Margaret Bourke-White meet Mr. Clean and the Fuller Brush salesman.)

The exhibit includes digital photos, the cleaning uniforms and a short video by Sajecki of Hildebrandt's adventures, which is shown in a makeshift shrine to step-scrubbing, complete with faux marble steps and several dozen canisters of Bon Ami Polishing Cleanser that Hildebrandt emptied.

As clever as this is as a point of entry to East Baltimore lore, it's only part of Hildebrandt's work in the exhibit. She also researched the history of East Baltimore and painted some of its characters — a ship's captain who slept in Patterson Park, assembly line workers at the Natty Boh brewery and an imagined captain who slept in Patterson Park, assembly line workers at the Natty Boh brewery and an imagined dinner scene from the old Hausman's restaurant, with patrons like Cornelius Vanderbilt, J. P. Morgan, Lucre Deppal and John Waters.

These aren't super-realistic depictions (Waters' mustache is too bushy, for one thing) but they capture the flavor of the neighborhoods and some of the



Megan Hildebrandt knocked on doors to ask residents if they wanted their steps washed as part of the Creative Alliance exhibit. PHOTO COURTESY OF MEGAN HILDEBRANDT

if you go

The Rumors Are True: Megan Hildebrandt & Christine Sajecki runs through Feb. 21 in the Main Gallery at the Creative Alliance at the Patterson, 3134 Eastern Ave. The Creative Alliance is open 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Admission is free, although donations are welcome. Call 410-275-1651 or go to creativealliance.org.

city's vaunted quirkiness. There's a casualness to the images — either acrylic and ink or gouache and ink — that makes them entertaining character sketches. Hildebrandt's sense of humor comes through even in the New Yorker-style captions she provides ("Rumor has it," one goes, "old Mr. Tasty, sure to be cleaning the neighborhood from noon until three a.m., sells more

than just soft serve.")

This is the essence of Hildebrandt's contribution to the show, the result of all those scrubbing excursions (besides the polished steps). While her work can be pointed the way Edward Gorey's is, she doesn't put Baltimore down. In her step-scrubbing re-enactment and her paintings, Hildebrandt never crosses over into being condescending about her subject matter. If anything, she is laughing with Baltimore, not at it, in a fond, knowing, *I Love Lucy* sort of way. If she ever tires of making art, she could have a bright future as a corporate spokeswoman for Bon Ami or Taste Freeze. For now, she is Baltimore's *Rumors Are True*.

If Sajecki is upstaged in the exhibit by Hildebrandt's step-scrubbing theatrics, it doesn't diminish the impact of her own beautifully realized paintings. The Connecticut native, 28, looks at East Baltimore, too, but she takes a more wistful, poetic approach to the same territory — the barren backyards behind rowhouses, the gritty commercial strips. There's a hazy, abstract, haunting quality to much of her work,



Christine Sajecki creates encaustic paintings of scenes such as barren rowhouses. PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRISTINE SAJECKI

like looking through mist or fog.

Sajecki's technique suits her point of view. She creates encaustic paintings, which means that she paints with beeswax mixed with pigment, applied on birch panels. It's a technique that dates back to the ancient Greeks and was revived years ago by American artist Jasper Johns. Sajecki combines the beeswax with metal leaf accents and photocopies of Peruvian ruins, East European alphabets and Catholic imagery, which gives her work a layered effect — a fitting metaphor for the layers of history and culture she mines.

The decision to pair these two artists was made by Creative Alliance artistic director Jodi Dodds, who served as the exhibit's curator. Dodds interspersed their work in the gallery in a way that brings out common themes and fosters a visual dialogue. Together, the artists counterbalance each other: Hildebrandt provides the lighthearted, irreverent take on a subject, and Sajecki responds with a more steeled-eyed look that brings the show down to earth. Between the two, viewers get a good look at East Baltimore, the sweet and the bitter-sweet.