

Worth An Office Visit

By Mary McCoy

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With most area galleries taking their customary August break, this is a great time to explore some of the little-known exhibit spaces in the offices of businesses and international organizations.

At the International Monetary Fund, the guard will give you a guest pass to see the powerful work of German artist Felix Droese. Casually installed in the imposing multistory atrium, it bristles with raw energy. Huge cutouts of hungry men whose ribs are as jagged as wolf's teeth hang on the atrium pillars; a curious upright triangle on wheels, its base made of a figure apparently hanging on for dear life, towers near the stairs like a medieval siege machine.

The specific subjects of Droese's works are often obscure, a weakness that does allow for a range of interpretations (something the sculptor claims to welcome). In the tradition of conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, Droese is outspoken about culture and politics. But far from being the visual equivalent of slogan-shouting, his works provoke thought through a multitude of often conflicting meanings.



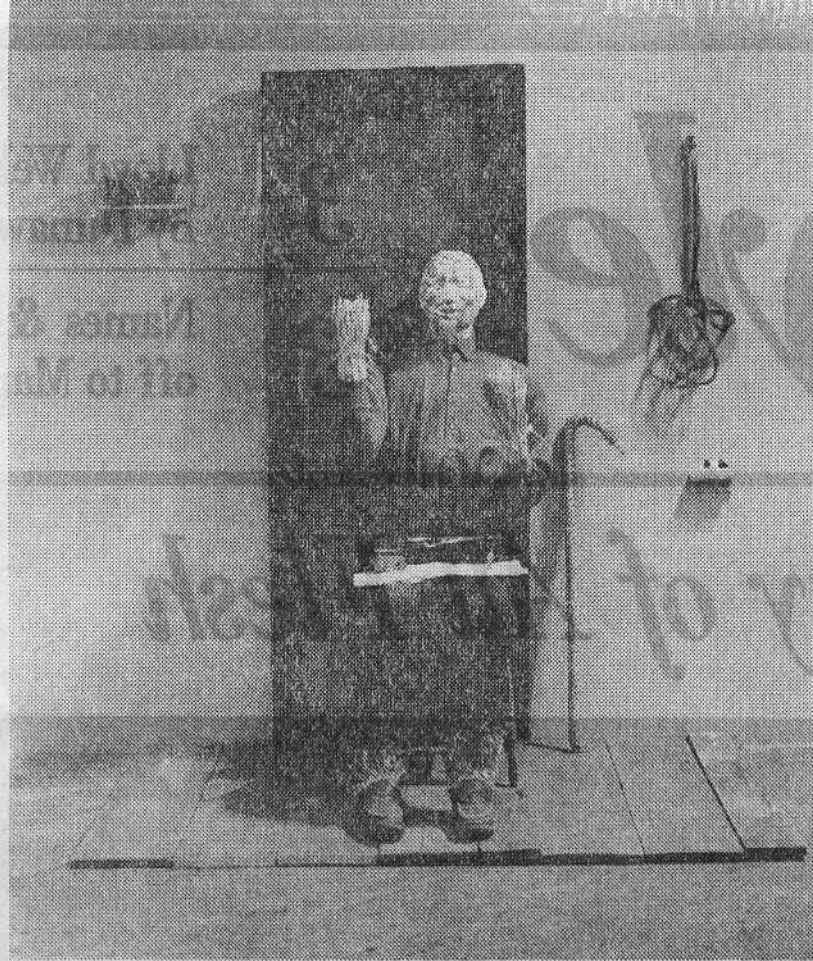
A Felix Droese work on view at the IMF atrium.

In the context of this financial center, "Money," a series of small block prints, is especially potent. With materials such as a chest X-ray, dried elderberries and the word "Geld" printed in animal blood, these works variously equate money with health, prosperity, violence,

sacrifice and celebration, as Droese loosely traces money's status from sacred offering to vehicle of power.

Lee at Arnold & Porter

The Lafayette Center gallery at the law firm of Arnold & Porter, one of the Washington area's strongest art supporters, is open during office hours, though it's best to call ahead. There, Baltimore artist Stephen



Baltimore artist Stephen Lee's straw figures, including "Porch Poetic" (above), offer flavors of both Great Britain and Appalachia.

Lee's straw figures offer a taste of both Great Britain and Appalachia.

The figures resemble seated scarecrows, each equipped with props conveying its character, like the attributes of a saint. "When I was traveling in the Blue Ridge," Lee explains, "I photographed porches and talked to the people sitting on them. The figures are composites of memories."

Dried flowers cover the plaster head of the figure in "Porch Poetic." His straw wrists, protruding from a dark shirt, are raised over the open pages of a carved wooden book. Around his neck hangs a snapshot of a porch, a sort of miniature theater for storytelling and reflection.

Quite different is Lee's tall, barrel-chested "Straw Man," which is thatched from wheat straw with the traditional methods used on cottage roofs in the artist's native Britain. A spiral pattern borrowed from the small British fertility charms called corn dollies twists up its head and arm. The figure has a spooky magnetism, evoking legends from giants to Robin Hood.

Crovo and Dobarro at OAS

The gallery at the Organization of American States is a particular joy because to reach it, one must traverse an interior courtyard tiled with images of Aztec gods. In the gallery are abstract paintings by two Argentine artists whose work could hardly be more different. Nora Dobarro's paintings are calm and care-

fully thought out. Hilda Crovo's are spontaneous and turbulent.

Crovo's impassioned forms and colors are strikingly like those of Washington painter Sylvia Snowden, minus the latter's impasto. Thrusting and cascading across Crovo's canvases, gestures meet in interlocking swirls. Fields of white tinged with creamy curlicues, like foamy eddies under a waterfall, press against deep blue, red and black with a sureness any artist would envy.

Dobarro is a less masterly painter, but her rows of hieroglyphics sketched onto fields of saturated color speak clearly of the urge for balance and order, while evoking plant forms and ancient symbols. The most inviting is a work in which skinny Y-shaped forms hover on top of collaged strips of houndstooth cloth. From a distance, it reads as a pictographic forest buzzing with barely concealed activity. Up close, it is a tactile field in which the fabric's crisp broken-check pattern plays hide-and-seek with flat strokes of brilliant red and blue paint.

Felix Droese, at the International Monetary Fund, 700 19th St. NW, through Sept. 30. \$250-\$25,000.

Stephen Lee, at Arnold & Porter, 1155 21st St. NW, 9th floor, through Oct. 6. \$300 (limited-edition photographs)-\$4,000.

Hilda Crovo and Nora Dobarro, at the Organization of American States, 17th Street and Constitution Avenue NW, through Sept. 9. Prices not available.