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Seeking the soul of interior spaces

By *CHRISTOPHER YASIEJKO, The News Journal*

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The first solo exhibition of Monique Rollins' paintings, drawings and collages is at Tower Hill School in Wilmington. This is a 2003 landscape.

"Kitchen Maine," by Douglas Martenson. Martenson's work is part of "The Painted Interior," an exhibition at the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts.

Douglas Martenson is an observational realist -- he paints what he sees before him, rather than from a photograph. It's a rigorous process that requires him to choose one recurring block of sunlight during which he can work on a particular piece.

Take, for example, his painting "Kitchen Maine." It's among Martenson's contributions to "The Painted Interior," an exhibition at the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts that opened Oct. 17 and continues through Feb. 4. The show comprises works from Martenson, Christopher Gallego and Morgan Craig, whose included paintings focus on domestic spaces, ordinary objects and abandoned factories.

Martenson painted "Kitchen Maine" in a house he rents with his wife and daughter for several weeks each August in Blue Hill, Maine. He chose to paint the kitchen as seen during the morning light, from 9 to 11.

Light, he says, changes with every inch, so Martenson, who since 1978 has made his home in Philadelphia, would mark on the painting where

light and shadows began and ended during his two-hour window.

His paintings employ an optical curve that resembles what you'd see when looking through a wide-angle lens, a perspective Martenson says is closer to reality than many realize.

Craig, also a Philadelphian, focuses in "The Painted Interior" on portraits of abandoned industrial spaces. Even outside this exhibition, he has become artistically obsessed with factories, prisons and asylums, always abandoned. Craig finds himself in a race against time, he says, "because many of these places are disappearing."

He works from photographs, but he isn't a photorealist. Craig will crop an image, or add or subtract elements from another.

"Memory is fact and fiction together," he says.

Part of that approach is a byproduct of the slivers of time he's granted to explore the factories, which in this case he found in Omaha, Neb., and in Pennsylvania towns such as Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, Bethlehem and Pottsville. (Craig sometimes must tour a facility on the sly, but even his sanctioned visits are brief.)

"So many lives went in and out of these factories," Craig says, "and you can see it in the decay."

He names the paintings so as to personify the structures -- "She Once Moved, With Such Grace" and "Pensive, She Waits, to Wave, and Welcome Them Home (for Ashley)," for example. He considers the interiors "tantamount ... to what people might call a soul."

Whereas Craig's scenes are large and inclusive of dead mechanisms that beg for explanations, Gallego's paintings concentrate on the mundane. "Drop Cloth" is ripe with subtleties. A drop cloth, shown draped over a small rectangular table, is pockmarked with 90-degree angles of green or red or blue paint that perhaps bled past the edges of canvas corners. The fabric is so realistic as to invite the viewer to rearrange its folds.

Gallego's other pieces in this exhibition, curated by J. Susan Isaacs, include "Door," which depicts a portion of a door with locks, a deadbolt and handle.

Gallego said he likes to daydream, and he finds his subjects almost by accident; he'll notice himself staring at something time and again, and the hypnotic effect is reason enough to render an image for posterity.

He spotted the subject of "Door" on the street, and "with the help of a very strong man," he says, he dragged the 8-foot door into his studio. Ultimately, he chose to reproduce the 23-inch section that most captivated him.

"I'm not really a storyteller," says Gallego, who works out of Woodstock, N.Y. "I just love painting. I like to think of myself as a painter of intangibles. I'm just painting light, gravity, weight and texture -- whatever subject I go for is just an excuse to explore those things."

Through Feb. 4. Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, 200 S. Madison St., Wilmington. \$5; students and 65 and older \$3; 12 and younger free. Also free Saturdays, 10 a.m.-1 p.m.; and Wednesdays. Open Tuesdays, Thursdays, Friday and Saturdays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.;

and Wednesdays and Sundays, noon-5 p.m. Visit www.thedcca.org or call 656-6466.