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Hilliard unveils Festivals Acadiens poster, exhibits

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The Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum celebrated the opening of three new exhibits last Friday evening in an extravagant event that also unveiled the 2017 Festivals Acadiens et Creole poster.

The setting sun cast a warm gold blush over the grounds as patrons of the arts dressed, if not to the nines at least to the sevens, mixed and mingled with mixed drinks from the complimentary bar that became the base camp for my sorties into the soirée.

The waitstaff, dressed in black and carrying silver trays of hors d’oeuvres, floated in and around the throngs offering small squares of toast piled with pulled pork and a delicate orange jam and, with the appropriate semi-apologetic air, sliced cucumbers garnished with fire-roasted red pepper hummus.

My first encounter with the hors d’oeuvres left me with a handful of a delicate fruit jam and led to a feverish search for a napkin or someone rich enough to not care when I “accidentally” brushed my jellied palm across his seersucker suit. I settled for a napkin.

The benevolent relationship between local businesses and the Lafayette arts scene was on display as representatives from LUS Fiber and Capital One spoke before the ceremonial unveiling of the official poster for this year’s Festivals Acadiens et Creole. Flanked by Milton Guilbeau (a pedal steel guitar maker who gained notability after building a pedal steel out of plumbing parts), Jay Steiner, Junior Martin and other instrument builders from around the state of Louisiana whose work is being featured in the new “Crafting the South Louisiana Sound” exhibit, these spokespeople attested to the importance of instrument makers.

The poster for Festivals Acadiens et Creole 2017, designed by St. Martinville native Dennis Paul Williams, comes across like a breathy, childlike reinterpretation of his “Atmosphere of Fate” series that ties into this year’s festival theme of “band of instrument makers.”

Williams’ art occupies an ethereal place that uneasily walks the line between evocative abstractions (like “Staph”) and a cloying sense of cosmic over-spirituality and naturalistic idealism that comes across more as superficial and insipid than inspiring (“Prophet”).

As the sun slowly disappeared behind the tall oak trees that populate the grounds, the string lights draped gracefully over the plaza made a striking marriage between the blue-lit glass of the museum and the stately white Doric columns of the A. Hays Town Building.

The “Artist Spaces” exhibit highlights works from the book of the same name, authored by Morgan Molthrop and Tina Freeman, a New Orleans-based photographer. Freeman’s photography focuses on places of creation and landscapes (her “Antarctica” and “Greenland” series are particularly compelling).

This particular exhibit features sculptures and paintings she photographed for the “Artist Spaces” book, alongside her photos, and provides thought-provoking dynamics in the relation between environment and output as well the influence of a given space upon the artist’s temperament and interpretation of an object.

The night was getting on, and so were the guests of the museum. I made a brief friendship with an old man in the line for the bar who insisted that I have “another” gin and tonic with him. I hadn’t had a first one with him, but I didn’t think the disconsideration was necessary.

A woman with white hair in a white shawl leaned over the railing of the second story and tried to gain everyone’s attention in what could have been an surreal rendition of a lesser-known Shakespeare balcony scene, but was instead just a request someone, anyone, to get her another Lake Arthur Sunset (vodka, grapefruit juice, grenadine).

The third exhibit that opened that night was William Kentridge’s “Journey to the Moon,” a captivating, absurdist short film that follows the arc of George Melies’ groundbreaking 1902 fantasy film of the same name.

In his film, Kentridge provides a commentary on the drama of an artistic space that complements Freeman’s Artist Spaces exhibit in its depiction of the artist’s

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studio as a place of action and creation and haunted by inspiration. It’s dynamic and exciting and a joy to watch. His use of the work of Méliès as a reference point brings in a consideration on the influence of art on cinema, cinema on art, cinema as art and the inherent theatricality of artistic endeavors.

“Journey to the Moon” will be shown until Jan. 20.

“Artist Spaces” will be shown until May 5.

“Crafting the South Louisiana Sound” will be shown until Oct. 15, when Festivals Acadiens et Creoles begins.

Come join me on the second level of the Hilliard, watching “Journey to the Moon” until my eyes fade.