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Galleries*Around Town, Sweeping Beauty*By Ferdinand Protzman
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A gallery tour through the art scene's Georgetown, Dupont Circle or Seventh Street hot spots may leave some viewers longing for some slash-and-burn, no-holds-barred, eco-attack art-making. But why not bag the theo-

ry for once and just go out and enjoy? Many of the art works on display are of impressively high quality. And they are undeniably pleasing to the eye. Paula Crawford's "Recent Paintings," at Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman Gallery provide a case in point.

"What attracted me so much about Paula's paintings was that they are just so beautiful to look at," says Vivienne Lassman. "She is a superb painter and her work is just gorgeous."

Crawford, who recently moved to Washington from New York City, works with oil paint that she sometimes mixes with wax, applying the mixture to canvas or linen with a palette knife, building up an abstract-expressionist background of commingled, complementary colors. Once she is satisfied that the background could stand alone as a painting,

she begins applying a more structured over-painting, frequently a pattern she has taken from fragments of Renaissance lace. The pattern is put on using layers of thin, dark glazes and impasto opaque whites. The size of her paintings is often heroic. Some of them measure 8 by 12 feet.

A few other contemporary artists, including international star Ross Bleckner, have similar styles. But Crawford's works, which she titled as numbered "Fugues," have a richer texture,

more tightly composed, repetitious patterns and a kind of old-world charm that is unique. They are priced from \$3,000 to \$12,000. All are quite beautiful and blatantly decorative, for which she offers no apologies.

"All painting is decorative, and those who try to argue otherwise are just wrong. Painting ends up on people's walls or on museum walls. It enhances the space that it's in," says Crawford, a 42-year-old who taught at the Corcoran School of Art from 1989 to 1992. "No matter how disturbing I want to make a painting, that doesn't change. Look at Francis Bacon's works. As horrifying as the subject matter might be in some of them, they are still beautiful. Painting is a set of aesthetic problems being solved by the painter. To get away from that leads to the monochrome, and where do you go from there?"

That notion of pulling in viewers by enchanting their eyes can be seen at a number of exhibitions around town, including Luis Jimenez's recent drawings, watercolors, prints and maquettes at Marsha Mateyka Gallery, the cartoonlike narratives of Anders Shafer at Gallery K or Swiss artist Fifo Stricker's fanciful etchings, prints and watercolors at Robert Brown Gallery. Ideas of what beauty means will also be explored in "Theories of the Decorative," a group exhibition at both locations of Baumgartner Galleries featuring 12 artists from around the world.

This recent outburst of beauty is not a turning point in contemporary art but a sign of what ARTnews magazine once called the no-trend era, a time marked by a loosening of theoretical strictures, a more ready acceptance of various art forms and a willingness to see beauty as something worth pursuing.

"I've been waiting and hoping for some new romantic spirit in the art world because I'm so tired of the tyranny of theory," Crawford says. "Maybe that's why I'm so drawn to the old works in museums, because they have this incredible aesthetic appeal."

Paula Crawford, "Recent Paintings"; Hsin-Hsi Chen, "Drawings"; Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman Gallery, 1710 Connecticut Ave. NW, Wednesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 202-667-8106; through Oct. 2.