

## GALLERIES

## At Katzen, Metro Lady's admonition inspires

BY JESSICA DAWSON

**"See something? Say something!"**

By now, most Washington area commuters tune out Metro Lady's recorded admonition, the one that's broadcast through subway stations at all-too-regular intervals.

Unpack those two sentences, though, and you've got a chilling message. Isn't she really saying: "People might want to kill innocent Metro riders. Would-be terrorists could act strangely or leave unattended packages. Let us know if you spot one"?

Pair that subterranean warning with its incongruously chirpy delivery and you've got a particularly 21st-century American dissonance. It's the paradox of post-9/11 society in a country that came late to the notion of domestic terrorism.

Does Metro Lady speak of the banality of evil? The futility of mass paranoia? The ubiquity of surveillance? Yes, yes and yes.

The richness of Metro Lady's caution was not lost on Gery De Smet when the artist, 49, visited Washington two years ago. De Smet's work engages many of the issues implicit in Metro Lady's message, even as he approaches them from a more Eurocentric vantage (he's based in Belgium and exhibits largely in Europe).

"See Something? Say Something!" is the title of the artist's sharp, sardonic solo exhibition at American University's Katzen Arts Center. The suite of paintings tucked into the museum's uppermost reaches (and, happily, the only Katzen galleries genuinely hospitable to painting) is a worthy visual expression of Metro Lady's concerns.

In one painting, De Smet paints the phrase into a hillside as if it were Los Angeles's "Hollywood" sign. Imagine that warning blasting silently across the L.A. basin — it just might happen in a not-too-distant future.

What's striking about De Smet's work is that he packages a contemporary message in the old-fashioned, messy medium of painting. And not just painting, but painterly painting — in his best works, De Smet's tactile surfaces and curious color juxtapositions make you want to reach out and touch them. (Or, in my case, steal a



**PLUMS FOR THE TAKING:** Gery De Smet's "Pflaumen Abzugeben" (2005) is from his "U loot I shoot" series.

few.) His charismatic surfaces bring humanity to subjects that might otherwise feel blisteringly cold.

De Smet's strongest works hail from a series called "U loot I shoot," a group of smallish canvases that are roughly notebook-page-size. The artist derived that label from a spray-painted warning in post-Katrina New Orleans, but removed from that context, the phrase suggests a more generalized trigger-happiness.

One of my favorites is the strange canvas called "Pflaumen Abzugeben." Its title comes from the sign that hangs, almost abstractedly, from a fence in the foreground. That fence, traced in heavy black acrylic, stands before a house and a tree painted in broad black outlines. Filling in those lines is a hue so vivid it's probably best

described as "security orange." The pigment alone gives off a sense of urgency and watchfulness.

The sign, written in German, indicates that plums are for the taking — sort of. De Smet says such signs are posted in areas where selling fruit isn't legal; instead, vendors claim to be giving them away. So "Pflaumen Abzugeben," with its pirated fruit selling and five-alarm palette, becomes an emblem of toeing some (not always clear) moral or public line.

Other works in "See Something? Say Something!" reference GPS, airports and crowds. The exhibition's largest canvases hail from a series called "Today All Circuits Are Closed," a title evoking clogged phone lines or jammed airwaves but depicting something more literal. Each painting is a

portrait of a racetrack: Germany's Nuerburgring, Britain's Silverstone, Indianapolis Motor Speedway. De Smet paints them with a vagueness reminiscent of satellite images. You might briefly mistake them for airport runways. As in all of De Smet's work, a surveilled world emerges.

Metro Lady, we see everything. Should we say something?

**'Informed Design'**

Long View Gallery tops the list of Washington's most art-unfriendly gallery spaces — the 5,000-square-foot concrete canyon is tailored to the many parties and events held there, not the art on view.

But what's not good for art can be great for architects. Right now the

gallery is hosting an exhibition that most of D.C.'s more-intimate galleries couldn't: Two accomplished area architects created galleries within the gallery, scaling down the outsize space to art-friendly proportions. And while both installations included artworks by area creatives, design and architecture are the standouts here.

In the front room, Ernesto Santalla installed carpet tiles to demarcate his gallery zone, which includes painting, sculpture and Santalla's own photograph. But all of these works take a back seat to this installation's star: a very long and very low wood block of a bench that the architect hand-rubbed to a near-reptilian finish. Almost too low to pass as seating but too high to be anything else, the bench has an animal presence.

Long View's main room hosts architect David Jameson's hallway "gallery" hugging a south wall. Jameson defined his installation with remarkable grace using steel I-beams. Snaking up, down and around, the beams trace lines in space like a three-dimensional sketch.

Inside the hallway, Jameson installed work by four area artists, most culled from the Hemphill Fine Arts stable. (Jameson designed the gallery's 14th Street space.) In a clever move, Jameson fashioned wooden boxes to house a Mary Early sculpture and two James Huckenpahler pigment prints. Both artists benefit from these jewel box-like houses, which lend their elusive works a bit of heft.

*style@washpost.com*

Dawson is a freelance writer.

**"GERY DE SMET: SEE SOMETHING? SAY SOMETHING!"**

at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW, through Aug. 8. Tuesday-Sunday, 11 a.m. — 4 p.m. 202-885-2787. [www.american.edu/katzen](http://www.american.edu/katzen)

**"INFORMED DESIGN"**

at Long View Gallery, 1234 Ninth St. NW, through Aug. 1. Wednesday-Saturday, 11 a.m. — 6 p.m.; Sunday, noon-5 p.m. 202-232-4788. [www.longviewgallery.com](http://www.longviewgallery.com)