

Galleries

# Swamp Thing

*From D.C.'s Betsy Stewart, the Most Luminous Pond Slime You'll Ever See*

By JESSICA DAWSON  
Special to The Washington Post

Like her new neighbor Fresh Fields, Sally Troyer has this month devoted her Dupont Gallery to all things organic. Urbanites who get in touch with nature by squeezing melons in the produce aisle might find visiting this show approximates a day in the country. District painter Betsy Stewart opens the show with a quasi-religious hymn to protozoa. Eleven of her "Pond Totems" hang in a ring around Troyer's main room. As their name suggests, these tall slivers of canvases are near human-height—most are five feet tall and about a foot wide; two reach over 6½ feet. Each canvas is stretched around a frame that protrudes several inches into the room.

Despite their vaguely confrontational form, these panels come in peace. The totems play host to delicate images of the residents of ponds and tide pools drawn in ink or painted using acrylic. Squiggles of amoebas and tadpoles swim around shrubs and reeds in a world seemingly divorced of scale. Although Stewart's palette takes cues from these murky inhabitants, her slime is more luminous than any pond scum I've seen. Rich bronze and moss green are infected with lavender and washes of light blue; plankton and amoebas drawn in black ink appear to float over the colored background.

If their oblong shape and briny subject matter remind you of watery ecosystems from Biology 101 textbooks, the re-

semblance is more than passing. When she began this series a year and a half ago, Stewart copied diagrams and photographs from science texts to create a visual pattern book that forms the backbone of this series. Her first stabs at these petri dish chronicles hang in an adjacent room, where square panels and drawings host the same mutating cells and squirmy things the totems do. But the relative muteness of these smaller pieces serves mainly as testimony to the talismanic power of the totem-shaped works.

With their shared vocabulary, Stewart's pieces fall short on distinctiveness—you don't need to look too long at any one to get the gist of the series. Collectively, though, the totems transform the gallery's front room into a contemplative place, signaling reverence like stained glass in a church. For harried urbanites too busy to exchange intimacies with the plankton, a few minutes' immersion in Stewart's aquatic wonderland should suffice.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF INKBOX GALLERY

A hymn to protozoa: Two of Betsy Stewart's five-foot-tall "Pond Totems."