

AROUND TOWN

Orchids: Take a Walk on the Wild Side — The annual orchid exhibit is on display through April 22 at the National Museum of Natural History. 202-633-1000; www.mnh.si.edu

» **Nature's Barcodes** — Explore how DNA from plants can be used for species identification. On display through March 25 at the USBG Conservatory, 100 Maryland Ave. SW. 202-225-8333; www.usbg.gov

Convergences: Towards a Jewish/Muslim Renewal — Featuring Tunisian Muslim artist Karim Chaibi and American Jewish artist Tom Block through April 9 at Gateway's Heliport Gallery, 8001 Kennett St., Silver Spring. 301-562-1400; www.gatewaycdc.com



ARTSCAPE

Make an art love connection

By Robin Tierney
Special to The Examiner

You don't have to be coupled-up to indulge in the box of visual chocolates recently opened at Gallery Neptune. LOVE BIRDS soars beyond the concept's conventional monogamy as eight regional artists present their singular valentines to relationships — with significant others of various species, the world and the self.

The sampler includes "Tattoo," an acrylic by Lisa Montag Brotman, whose exquisitely colored, alternate-reality narratives enflame curiosity. This latest presentation in a three-decade evolution of Brotman's female forms depicts a woman caught in an inquisitive yet introspective moment, drifting in a fanciful wall-papered world of her own.

Known for stoking creative fire at the Washington Glass School, Michael Janis releases shivers instead of cupid quivers with "The Rapture" and "Falling From Grace." Their sensuality owes to his inventive technique of drawing with powdered glass.

The bond between people and their animal companions is the subject of Kirk Waldroff's tactile black and white wood block prints that celebrate mutual adoration between a woman and her bird.

Speaking of birds, Neptune owner Elyse Harrison shares her latest creations—five sculpted birds bearing Beatles, Lou Reed and Peter Dinklage love-song lyrics on their wings.

John Lancaster shares his feelings behind his pen and ink "Equilibrium" and "A Tenuous Glimpse," which strike a wonderful balance between light touch, deep thought and sharp wit. "These are little meditations on the perilous nature of life and the importance of having someone to count on while we move through it."

Lancaster is an artist who commits; he doesn't sketch out ideas. "Once the pen touches the paper, I don't stop or erase until it is done. I begin with my eyes closed, deep in thought and just let the pen move until shapes appear that I can fill out and complete." As a result, "Fun, subconscious things to appear."

This assortment will leave you yearning to taste more from these heart-and-soul-stirring talents. Make a date to treat yourself to this show. Note: next month, Gallery Neptune moves to new digs two blocks away.

Illuminating the City of Light

By Robin Tierney
Special to The Examiner

Unromantic but true: Great cities don't just happen; they're engineered.

Otherwise, Paris might have become the City of Blight instead of the City of Light. In the 1860s, Napoleon III dispatched urban planner Baron Haussmann to draw the clean, efficient edge of modernity over the overcrowded medieval capital. Tenements were demolished, streets widened, gardens planted, sewers installed and more than 20,000 gas lamps erected.

Advocates hailed the changes, critics mourned losses, and practitioners of the nascent art of photography reveled in documenting the transformation. Witness this monumental urban renewal project through their lenses in Paris in Transition, which opens Sunday the National Gallery of Art.

Documentary photography in the 19th century was literally a big undertaking, since those splendid atmospheric shots demanded on-the-spot development. Negatives were the same size as the photographs, explained curator Sarah Kennel. Cameramen transported mobile darkrooms caravan-style, packing bulky plates of glass, solutions and other paraphernalia.

Their output endured, now sweeping us from fresh-paved boulevards to unmarked brothels, busy markets, manicured parks, newly cast statues and sweeping aqueducts. The artfulness arrests our postmodern eyes, but back in these pioneers' day, it was the technology that amazed. Proclaimed one critic, "It is life itself, and [Charles] Nègre has stopped it in a hundredth of a second."

In an exquisitely detailed full-frontal frame-filling record of the Louvre's new library, Édouard-Denis Baldus recorded a common experience of Second Empire Parisians — the juxtaposition of elegant exteriors with chaotic interiors of buildings under renovation. Shots of the Seine, its waters still, its banks cleared for development, corraling a backdrop of towering buildings — silent as illustrations or old movie sets.

At first glance, the Virgin Mary



in Auguste Mestral's 1854 composition appears alive, wistfully contemplating her fate amid construction debris during the re-Gothicization of the Notre Dame. It's a brilliant merger of sacred and profane. Having lost her high-profile tier to new sculpted figures, the Virgin and her child were eventually relocated atop the cathedral.

Modernization led to a great gig for Charles Marville, the photographer commissioned to record structures and statues slated for the wrecking ball. Then there's the painterly work of Edmond Lebel, whose legacy includes a marvelous 1863 still life of musical instruments.

Even failed photo projects left visual mementos to savor. Félix Tournachon's attempts through the 1850s to photograph Paris from the



Above: André Kertész's "Under the Eiffel Tower," 1929

Left: Brassai's "Couple at the Four Seasons Ball," Rue de Lappe, Paris, c. 1932

air were thwarted by gas from his hot-air balloon ruining the sensitive photographic plates. Thankfully, that left him time to stage and snap his utterly delightful "Self-Portrait with Wife Ernestine in a Balloon Gondola." Persistence was eventually rewarded in 1858, when Tournachon (aka Nadar) produced the world's first aerial photograph.

The third gallery includes early 20th century highlights from previous exhibitions. André Kertész's "The Ants," formally known as "Under the Eiffel Tower," depicts through shadow the icon born of the belle époque. American master Alfred Stieglitz trained his lens downward on a workhorse and dog; overcast weather and unexpected composition make for a gem.

Tracking subcultures that mushroom in cosmopolitan soil, Brassai stops time with portraits of "Venuses of the crossroads" — prostitutes — and a transvestite ball.

PARIS IN TRANSITION

On view Sunday-May 6

» **Venue:** National Gallery of Art, West Building, Sixth and Constitution Ave. NW

» **Info:** 202-737-4215; nga.gov

» **Related programs:** Lecture by curator Sarah Kennel at 2 p.m. March 4

With modernity came a burgeoning bourgeoisie class having time for long, leisurely strolls. The French even had a name for this past-time: "Flânerie." One devoted flâneur, Eugène Atget, used his camera to capture mannequins enlivening shop windows, lion-head door-knockers, exquisitely crafted store signs.

The capital of art, fashion and pleasure was not born, but made. Glimpses of Paris in Transition justify some flânerie of your own.

LOVE BIRDS

On view through Feb. 24

» **Venue:** Gallery Neptune, 4808 Auburn Ave., Bethesda

» **Related Concerts** with classical vocalist Maris Wicker singing Kurt Weill on Feb. 10 and 11; free but reservations suggested

» **Info:** 301-718-0809; www.galleryneptune.com