

THE RADAR ART

BY JOHNNA RIZZO



THE ART OF TRAVEL: This month, the Cultural Institute of Mexico shows such pieces as Irene Clouthier's *Soldier* (Frida)

WEAPONS OF MASS COLLECTION *DC's Embassy Row offers an in-town international art alternative to trotting the globe*

With no high-season off time to explore distant foreign shores during the long, hot summer, what's a savvy art hound with an acquisitional itch to do? A bit of cunning and a few hours of free time can both land you on foreign soil and bag you a new find for your burgeoning international collection. Forget what you know about Kahlo (yeah, we know you saw Salma's movie), classical Italian sculpture (who hasn't spent hours poring over the nudes at the National Gallery?) and other big-venue imports. The exhibits found inside the walls of the Capital's international embassies feature photos, sculptures and paintings that are breaking new ground in the art world, all in a setting that's more old country than new wave. A simple spin through a few of the icons lining Massachusetts Avenue will suffice to plant your feet in the contemporary art scene in Europe and beyond. By an afternoon's end, your inner artistic explorer will have discovered new lands.

MEXICO As recounted in *Frida*, Alfred Molina's Diego Rivera was commissioned to decorate Nelson Rockefeller's famed New York City building with Mexican murals. The artist got fired before finishing. Perhaps fortunately, the real-life Rivera was too busy to take a brush to the walls of the former Mexican Embassy (1921–1989), but he did recommend his student Cueva de Rio. It took almost the entire decade of the 1930s for de Rio to finish the interior walls lining the staircase of what is now the Cultural Institute of Mexico—all four, high-ceilinged stories. The end result is one of Washington's interior treasures, featuring volcanoes, Aztec rituals and a Oaxacan feast. The mansion itself was built for President Taft's secretary of state, Franklin MacVeagh, and designed by architect Nathan C. Wyeth, who went on to design the West Wing. The

exhibit rooms pack a one-two punch of modern and historic art. On the ground floor, *Mexico: The Revolution and Beyond*, an exhibition of photo documenting Mexico's turbulent revolution years at the turn of the century are on display through July 11. Images include one of Rivera walking in funeral procession for a communist leader, actress Gracila Lara taking bath and two surprised upper-class women whispering secrets in the corner of a street car. Four flights up, contemporary Latino art by DC locals brings a present-day frisson to the Frida Kahlo gallery.

AUSTRALIA Leo's got everyone thinking green these days, but even the best-intentioned among us are sometimes hard-pressed to keep the Earth foremost on our minds. Fortunately, Australia's Philip Wolfhagan has created a series of canvases that keep us contemplating our place in the environment. Wolfhagan's *Vapour Trails* includes 20 painted cloud musings (on display at the Australian embassy's main floor art gallery through July 12) influenced by the greatest hits of tempestuous landscapes. Think John Constable meets *An Inconvenient Truth*. The artist's first international solo show offers an unprecedented preponderance of pieces ripe for picking up locally, as all the works were created specifically to suit these Washington walls. "Painting clouds is a gesture to the universal," says Wolfhagan. "Repetitive, unfolding, unfurling, so you get a sense of actually watching them move across the sky." And for those who are less inclined to love landscapes, in late July, aboriginal art will inhabit the space. Giving geometrics and textures center stage, these works offer a modernist sensibility even though they are crafted using ancient techniques. CONTINUED...