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Some of the 16 paintings in Thebe Phetogo's show at Von Ammon Co. (Vivian Doering)

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In the galleries: A rock-and-roll odyssey through sex, race and religion

Thebe Phetogo

Arranged in two rows, the 16 paintings in Thebe Phetogo's show at Von Ammon Co. bear a resemblance to a lineup of criminals. But the subjects of the Botswana artist's "Blackbody Rogues' Gallery" are too fantastical to be taken for the usual suspects. Some of their bodies appear to be made of loosely linked tubers, and bared teeth give a few of their faces a skull-like quality. One visage seems to have merged with a massive butterfly, to ominous effect.

All but two of the figures are posed on single-hue expanses that resemble TV or movie green screens — except in a more lurid shade that suggests some kind of corrosive chemical. The green is actually paint, but the purplish brown that represents flesh in many of the pictures is shoe polish. Phetogo uses that substance to invoke blackface, once used in American and European minstrel shows but also in Ghana's "concert party" performances. Several of these paintings depict African political or mythological figures who are probably unknown to D.C. gallery-goers. Yet the vehemence of Phetogo's work is universal. His pictures are as caustic as their acrid green backgrounds.