

The Washington Post

Museums

In the galleries

By Mark Jenkins, June 1, 2017



Susan Middleton, *Three-lined nudibranch*, archival pigment print, 30 x 37 inches

Spineless

Often translucent and frequently sporting vivid orange appendages, the creatures of “Spineless” look as though they’ve been computer-generated. That’s partly because Susan Middleton’s photography is so crisp, and the backdrops are immaculate black or white. But it’s mostly because the subjects of this National Academy of Sciences exhibition are so fantastical.

They’re marine invertebrates, which constitute more than 98 percent of known oceanic species. “Known” here means catalogued by scientists, not necessarily recognizable by laymen. Even those familiar with the nudibranch, stubby squid and pink brittle star are likely to be impressed by the variety and strangeness of these gelatinous, often plantlike animals.

Originally made for Middleton’s 2014 book of the same name, the images in “Spineless” have a scientific purpose and are presented with plenty of zoological information. They can, however, be savored just as inadvertent art objects. The photos are color studies, experiments in form and depth and mini sci-fi movies all in one.

Susan Middleton: *Spineless* On view through June 23 at the National Academy of Sciences,

2101 Constitution Ave. NW. 202-334-2415. cpnas.org/exhibitions.