

GALLERY & STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist

Eight New Masters of Fine Art Make Their New York Debut at Noho Gallery

Although their school is set down in the bucolic landscape made famous by the painters of the Hudson River School, the eight artists in the Western Connecticut State University Master of Fine Arts Graduate Exhibition display an urbane, up-to-the-minute assortment of styles. In an era when some art schools have all but eliminated studio courses and put the emphasis on conceptual ploys and business strategies, WCSU is a place where the art of painting still holds sway, and that is refreshing in itself.

According to John Wallace, one of the practicing artists who are resident faculty members in the university's painting department, the graduates (some of whom are teachers themselves who returned to get their degrees) are also a varied group in terms of age and experience. This, too, is refreshing, in contrast to some more youth-oriented M.F.A. programs that have lately been flooding the market with seven day wonders who are hung up on juvenelia and often lack the substance to back up their hype.

And, indeed, a winning mixture of sophisticated maturity and youthful adventurousness is reflected in the WCSU graduates' first New York group exhibition, which can be seen at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from July 19 through August 6. (There will be a preview reception on Thursday July 21, from 5 to 8 PM and an opening reception on Saturday, July 23, from 3 to 6 PM.)

Heaven Lee Darling, who has a novel name and a background as a former rock musician to go with it, is an over-the-top Neo-Surrealist who works on a large scale. Darling's oil "Unstable Rebecca Dims" is a big, bold exercise in incongruity made coherent by a Dali-esque technical ability that enables him to merge morbid and erotic imagery with impressive panache. Darling is a maximalist who is not afraid to cram his compositions with plethora of startling

images and crank up the volume, so to speak.

Laurie Mathieson also works large, albeit in an abstract manner for which one critic for this publication coined the term "New Naturism." Like Gregory Amenoff and Bill Jensen, Mathieson seems a direct descendant of Arthur Dove and other early American pioneers of earthy nature-based abstraction. However, the scale and impact of Mathieson's mixed media paintings, such as "Knotted Branch," also hark back to the more biomorphic aspects of Abstract Expressionism.

Natural essences also figure prominently in "Swamp," a richly textured and coloristically intense painting by Bridget Eileen Grady, in which the forms of branches, rocks, and trees reflected in water afford the painter an opportunity for juicy, semi-abstract visual/tactile delectation. Grady's vigorous brushwork and muscularly delineated forms lend her acrylics on canvas a dynamic sense of compositional "push and pull."

Tony Zatzick sees painting as "an alchemical process, which transforms base materials into something that speaks to the essence of human experience." Zatzick's paintings, particularly, his large oil on paper "Forms and Pathways" are all about energy and gesture in a manner that sets him apart as a latter-day "action painter." That the picture is executed in grisaille calls even greater attention to the grace and vivacity of Zatzick's bravura brushwork.

Lee Cordon, on the other hand, puts a postmodern spin on Precisionism in her acrylic on canvas "Retrospect," which depicts a factory-like structure in various pale, creamy hues, set against purple hills and a vibrant blue sky in a meticulous hard-edge manner. Combining an austerity reminiscent of Sheeler with heightened chromatics, Cordon brings out the formal beauty of banal subjects.

Mounira Gareeva Stott, who also takes

off from architecture, albeit in a more painterly technique, states that she is "fascinated by the modern city as a work of nature." In Stott's oil "6th Avenue," urban towers soar skyward, their rectangular geometry contrasting sharply with the sensually rounded forms of clouds. The low angle from which we view these steely, veering forms enhances her painting's vertiginous dynamism.

"For me, painting is a process of discovery about myself and the world around me," says Anne Flynn of her accomplished and witty self-portrait, confronting the viewer in a paint-stained apron, brandishing brushes in both hands and balancing a cupcake on her head. Although Flynn's figure is flawlessly realistic, she presents herself on a plain pink ground, with splashy red flourishes, rather than the expected shadow, behind her cowgirl boots. With this single insouciant gesture, Flynn subverts illusion, slyly calling attention to the flatness of the two-dimensional picture plane.

Since so many young painters today are influenced by comics and fantasy illustration, it seems fair enough to include Michael Lavoie, who earned his M.F.A. in illustration among the fine art graduates in this show. Besides, Lavoie's "Hunting Oni," an acrylic on panel of warriors in ancient armor confronting a towering anthropomorphic monster in a dark forest, stands on its own as a compelling visual entity.

—J. Sanders Eaton

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