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In This Show, the Abstract Is Here and Now

Abstract Artists' Works on View at the Rye Arts Center

By SUSAN HODARA DEC. 7, 2012

RYE, N.Y. — Abstraction is often defined as what it is not: it is not representational, not objective, not figurative, not realistic, not narrative. “From Where I Stand: 12 Contemporary Abstract Artists,” an exhibition of 40 paintings and prints at the Rye Arts Center, aims to enlighten gallerygoers about what abstract art is and to present an assortment of methods and aesthetics at play in the genre.

The show includes oil and encaustic paintings, monotypes and monoprints, photo etchings, paper lithographs and digitally manipulated prints, most produced in the last three years. There are intricate patterns here, crisscrossing lines and bold geometric shapes; there is symmetry and there is asymmetry, saturated color and black and white.

“This exhibition was specifically designed to showcase diversity in hands-on image-making and to demonstrate both the range and accessibility of abstract art,” said Katharine Dufault, the show’s curator and a member of the center’s gallery committee.

In discussions with the participating artists about their work, a theme of

“elsewhere” arose. That didn’t surprise Ms. Dufault, an abstract painter and one of those exhibiting. “The sense of ‘other’ is a given within the process of abstraction,” she said. “These are artists who have created a language of color, form and line to translate their experiences and emotions into compositions that are intentionally removed from realism.”

Tess Recordon uses her abstract language to explore memories of traveling. Her seven small paintings in “From Where I Stand” are part of a series she produced after a trip to India. “These paintings relate to the ceremonial worship of Hindus bathing by the ghats in Varanasi and pooja ceremonies held daily at dawn and dusk,” she said.

The works are made up of amoebic shapes in oranges, purples, blues and greens swimming on jewel-toned backgrounds, sometimes surrounded by lightning-like bolts. “They refer to the surface of the water,” Mr. Recordon said, “litter and offerings floating and dispersing — flowers, human bone and ashes, animal carcasses.”

Place is also central to many of Kiki Dufault’s paintings. The artist (Ms. Dufault’s stepdaughter) studied figurative and landscape painting, “so that way of thinking was really ingrained,” she said. “The figure and the landscape are always sneaking their way into the work.”

They are there in her “Untitled Figurative Landscape,” where a flesh-toned shape slicing across the canvas suggests a horizon, and a darker vertical form on the left evokes a lanky woman hovering over the scene. In “Ocean Spill #1,” the color palette and several horizontal strips conjure a sandy beach with an overturned boat.

Yet she considers these images abstract. “I am allowing the unseen world to make its way into my work and my inner landscape to reveal itself,” she said. “If I were trying to paint a realistic landscape, there wouldn’t be that sense of the unknown emerging.”

Roxanne Faber Savage’s three photo etchings contain the most representational elements in the exhibition. In fact, viewers may be surprised to find clearly recognizable birds, power lines and a fat red bee collaged among areas

of texture, line and color.

Ms. Savage regards those identifiable images as symbolic facets of an abstracted composition. “For me, abstraction is taking something from nature and changing it,” she said. “There’s ambiguity in my work; you can read different things into it. It is not traditional representation.”

And it delves into mysterious terrain. “I see birds as symbols of many ideas, especially of freedom and the human soul,” Ms. Savage said. “My birds perching on wires are akin to spiritual messengers linked to the flight of the soul up to heaven. I’m not religious, but they became a way for me to think about heaven. They became my vehicle to enter this investigation.”

Other artists work in abstraction for the latitude it offers. Patricia Spergel, for instance, finds a broader sense of choice. In both of her paintings in the exhibition, a pale, globular mass nearly fills the frame and bounces on a background of contrasting hues: magentas and lavenders in one, salmons and greens in the other.

“I prefer to work abstractly because it gives me the freedom to invent,” Ms. Spergel said, “to work from my imagination without feeling tied down to making an exact representation from life, and to use my materials in an intuitive manner.”

David Fox turns to abstraction for its ability to convey movement. Mr. Fox makes both figurative and abstract drawings and prints, often based on the human body. When he works figuratively, he said, “If I draw an arm, it’s a depiction of that arm. The lines describe the form.”

The lines in his abstract pieces function differently; rather than portraying the body, they can express its activity. His prints in “From Where I Stand” include two monotypes with minimal color and two black-and-white oils on plastic; all consist of layers of bold, gestural brush strokes. “Depicting movement in figuration is very unsatisfying to me,” he said. “But in abstraction, when I make a line, it’s not literal. It’s a description of movement. It is movement.”

As a title, “From Where I Stand” captures Ms. Dufault’s curatorial intention to present a grouping of individual artistic visions. Most of the participating artists, who range in age from 35 to 50, live and work in the tristate area; two live in

England, where Ms. Dufault was born and raised (She moved to New York in 1987).

Ms. Dufault has hung the exhibition, which is the first show of contemporary abstract art at the center, to highlight connections from one piece to the next — through coloration, technique or graphic elements. “The works speak to one another,” she said. “There is a lyricism that you can follow all the way around the gallery.”

“From Where I Stand: 12 Contemporary Abstract Artists” is on view through Jan. 5, 2013, at the Rye Arts Center, 51 Milton Road, Rye. For more information: ryeartscenter.org or (914) 967-0700.

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