

arts wednesday

Ornate, pushy, celebratory — yet all compatible

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

"Simpatico" is a delicious new exhibition at Boston University Art Gallery at the Stone Gallery. The artists are all hands-on, playing with luscious materials, creating voluptuously messy but astutely designed works. And it's all abstract art, as if the no-holds-barred quality of abstraction were an invitation to roll in the pigment, to dare to get ugly, to throw on the glitter.

They're also all women, which goes unmentioned in any of the show's promotional materials, probably because Kate McNamara, the gallery's director and chief curator, isn't out to put together a "women's" show. That would be passé, a throwback to the days when women needed to mount their own exhibits to get attention. The artists in "Simpatico" have taken on the expressive methods of action painting, which in the mid-20th century was a movement that often specialized in depicting a heroic, if sometimes tormented, masculinity.

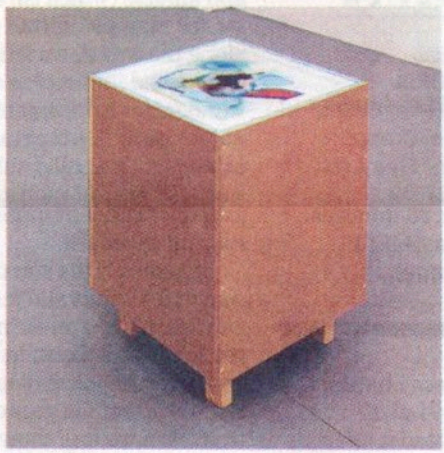
The works in "Simpatico" are celebratory. The centerpiece is Polly Apfelbaum's "Miss America," two lengths of red-carpet-sized banners unfurled on the floor. It's not a painting, although it refers to painting, as everything in this show does, in its attention to color and surface. The fabric is studded with glimmering sequins that sparkle and set off ripples of winking neon rainbows as you walk past. Set half a dozen girls with their Barbie dolls loose, and they'd have a ball with "Miss America."

Dona Nelson, born in 1947, is the matriarch of "Simpatico." Her two-sided painting "Pool Side" is a knockout. She doesn't care that the so-called verso side shows the bare-wood canvas stretcher and staples. Both sides are streaked and dolloped with blue-green paint, some soaked and dribbled on, some spackled. Great expanses of yellow spread over the front, like the sun gleaming on pool water. A knotty snake of gray muslin takes off like a kite from a strand of blue paint on the front and wraps around to the back, where it forks open — a nervy push of a painterly painting into the realm of sculpture.

The artists in "Simpatico" are unabashed, reveling in their materials. Laurel Sparks has left behind the chandelier template she's been using for years and surrendered to a grid full of triangles and



"Pool Side" (front side) by Dona Nelson.



Nicole Cherubini's "Wood Heat."

rectangles, but it's barely orderly. Her "Break China Laughing" is erratic, pushy, and ornate, shoving into three dimensions with warty knobs of papier-mâché and clusters of beads, and melting into several patterns, sometimes murky, sometimes glowing. Even in smaller works, such as Dana Frankfort's "TEST (II)," the paint application is wild, turning simple

text into violent gesture in a deep, rusty red, which Frankfort tops off with a warm, regal sheen of gold.

For all the abandonment to the material, which would do a finger-painter proud, there's also an astute sense of design in these works. Joanne Greenbaum and Carrie Moyer (who trained in graphic design) apply pigment and line to their large, sharp-toned canvases in myriad ways, playing with pattern, texture, and space. It's true, too, of ceramicist Nicole Cherubini, who leaves her fingerprints dimpled in works such as "Gorda Mountain," a vessel built out of a clay grid, dripping red, but frames it carefully in a wooden hexagon.

There's nothing tortured about the art in "Simpatico." It's a sophisticated romp, a joy ride through the sensual delights of making art.

Witty and awakened

Cherubini pairs with Beverly Semmes for a show at Samson, venturing out of her clay comfort zone to exhibit drawings. They're small, vaporous, bright-toned pieces in which the artist deploys a vari-

SIMPATICO
At: Boston University Art Gallery at the Stone Gallery, 855 Commonwealth Ave., through Oct. 21. 617-353-3329, www.bu.edu/art

BEVERLY SEMMES & NICOLE CHERUBINI: Tuesdays and Saturdays
At: Samson, 450 Harrison Ave., through Oct. 27. 617-357-7177, www.samsonprojects.com

ety of techniques and textures, betraying the strong influence of artists such as Moyer.

They pull you in. Cherubini has wittily displayed "Wood Heat" flat in a square case, so as to eliminate the question of orientation — any side could be top or bottom, so the form seems to spin, unanchored. There's a rush of blue-rimmed red over a steamy breath of black and peach at the center, around which cooler blues puddle and streak. Some poured blots of blue pucker, and in one there's a field of roiling teal craters. All these little details make for a nuanced topography.

Semmes is known for her installation work using the dress form, but here she's painting over clips from such magazines as "Playboy" and "Hustler" and large-scale photographs. "Slippers" features a cutout from one of the magazines. It shows a woman seated in a come-hither pose, but Semmes has covered her with a lively blot of yellow fringed with little orange curls along one side. We see only the model's face peering through a hole in the paint, and her legs. Even her high-heeled slippers have fluffy painted add-ons.

These works are sometimes comic, but often violent. The artist paints with an energized, feathery stroke, but the painted-over women look almost expurgated, often with only arms or hands remaining visible. Semmes is appropriating and obscuring objects of desire so that we can't see them. It amplifies the sense that these women can't be seen for who they are — they are all just what we project onto them, which in this case is paint. It's a rude awakening, after frolicking in the playground of abstraction with Cherubini and her cohorts in "Simpatico."

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