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Abstraction is the Norm for Artists Elise Nicol and Melissa Zarem

By Arthur Whitman | Posted: Wednesday, December 16, 2015 12:49 pm

Painters tend to be solitary creatures. Ensnared in their studios, surrounded by their tools and materials, wielding their arcane know-how—they work in rhythms and tempos often foreign to the culture at large. One goes to the studio, not exactly to escape reality, but with the hopes of remaking reality on one's own terms. Success or failure, the completion of the work—these are negotiated not by formulae or a show of hands but through a nuanced attunement with the work, the self, and the history of the form.



"Eternal City" by Melissa Zarem

And even for the viewer, a painting (or drawing, or print) is often something that addresses itself primarily to the individual. Painting is not a mass medium. It can't be; one has to stand in front of the thing or hold it. (Murals, true, are something else.)

For such reasons, genuine collaboration with other artists is as unusual as it is potentially liberating. At their best such experiences stretch the painter in new directions while maintaining the signature of style.

Such a collaboration forms the focus of "This is How it Starts: Works on Paper by Elise Nicol and Melissa Zarem." The show concludes a year of interesting exhibits at Cayuga Heights' Corners Gallery in particularly fine form. (It's on display from Nov. 10 through Jan. 30.)

Both Nicol, of Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, and Zarem, of Ithaca, specialize in abstract work on paper that crosses and combines media with exuberance and aplomb. Their art is experimental in the best sense: mixing, layering, and reworking marks and textures in process akin to cooking.

The two women have strong connections to Ithaca. Zarem, though raised in New York City—and for many years an artist-in-residence at the Henry Street Settlement House in Brooklyn—earned her BFA at Cornell and returned here to restart her artistic career after a hiatus with young children. Nicol, who received a BFA in Printmaking from the Maryland Institute College of Art, also has one in theatre from Ithaca College. Both artists have exhibited extensively in the area.

The two began their artistic and personal kinship a decade ago when both were living in Ithaca. Finding a likeness in their aesthetic voices, they met weekly for many years to exchange ideas.

Although Nicol moved away a few years ago, they have continued their collaboration.

In a email, Nicol, explained their process:

Melissa and I work together, on average, about a day and half to two days every month. The first thing that we do together is swap what we have that's new: a new drawing tool we've found or made and the mark it makes, a new ink or paint and the mark it makes, and, more often, new marks we've made with familiar tools and supplies. We then go to work side by side, at first imitating what the other has done, then making discoveries on our own, swapping those discoveries, and so on. The walls and floor in Melissa's studio become covered in drawings, some of them distinctly mine, some of them clearly Melissa's, and others, well, we're not sure.

The pair also exchanges handmade postcards "just to keep the conversation going."

"Starts" features small square pieces as well as larger ones by each artist. All of the work is unframed, attached directly to the wall with pins, magnet, and tape. (This seemingly informal presentation accentuates the physical rawness of the art, particularly given the prevalence of irregular, torn edges.) Everything is dated from 2015—an indication of the pair's prolificness.

The exhibit caps an exceptionally good year for Zarem. This past summer, she was one of the 11 artists selected for "Locally Sourced" at Cornell's Herbert F. Johnson Museum. The work of contemporary curator Andrea Inselmann, "Sourced" was a rare—and expansive—foray for the museum into presenting local art. In recent months, the artist has been part of group shows at Corners, at Exhibit A in Corning (where she is a "stable" artist), and the Community School of Music and Arts (where she has taught). The chance to see her work so frequently in public has been a blessing.

Next year, Zarem will be the subject of a one-person show at eye, a new gallery on the Commons that is already shaking up a local scene short on "serious" places to exhibit.

Zarem's work on paper uses ink, gouache, acrylic, crayon and graphite. A typical piece of hers combines loose, abstract expressionist brushstrokes; blocks and patches of color; vertical drips marking gravity; swirls and scribbles in crayon,; and nearly microscopic hatches and signs in ink.

Her witty conflation of doodles and mock-handwriting with serious abstract painting recalls Cy Twombly. But the combination of levity and weight is all hers.

Nicol works between photography, printmaking, painting, and drawing—often conflating and confusing their distinctive qualities. In 2013, she had a memorable exhibit of her abstract photography at Corners, "Strange How Hard it Rains Now." If the work in that show has a distinctly painterly quality, the work here is closer to drawing: linear, dry, astringent. As such, they make an intriguing counterpoint to Zarem's juicier concoctions.

Hung mostly in the front reception room and arranged less formally, larger pieces by each artist complement the collaborative efforts in the main gallery space.

Zarem is a master of the suggestive title—ones that match perfectly the omnivorous quality of her paintings. A diptych, the two adjacent sheets of *Eternal City* echo the structural straight edges inside, which manage to barely contain the expressionist churn. *On the Stove Too Long* conveys a remarkable sense of concentrated motion. A sweeping vertical red-orange brushstroke to the right appears counterpoised with dizzying loops hovering around the left. Dark ochre circles—small to large, as if pulsating—form a loose grid in *My Umbrella is Upside Down*. These punctuate a field of dirty yellowish gray paint further accented with gestural marks.

Most of Nicol's work in this show focuses on the motif of the repeated dot or circle. Her most common approach here (found in pieces large and small) features miniscule white dots repeated in space-filling "all-over" compositions of nearly hallucinatory intricacy. Variable in size, these hand-painted dots appear in fields and clusters against smooth black backgrounds.

The Part of Your Mind Where it's Unsafe to Travel is a particularly impressive example. It combines acrylic, charcoal powder, graphite, colored pencil, and ink. An intriguing tension is formed between dots that read as texture—thick and thin, like sand—and dots that line up in intersecting arcs to traverse the image.

(A similar approach is taken by a number of contemporary artists, many of them Japanese or Japanese-American. Yayoi Kusama has made the dot motif a signature over the course of her seven-decade career. Less well-known but more nuanced are the intricate dot-scapes of Barbara Takenaga and Hiroyuki Doi—the former primarily a painter, the latter a self-taught "outsider" artist who works with ink on paper.)

In other large pieces, Nicol's loose grids of dots or other marks evoke writing. The dark brown ink spots that grid *Finally We are Singing in Key* resemble burn marks or holes. Done in black-and-white monoprint and graphite, *Evidence Fades but the Legend Lives On* suggests torn paper cards marked with Braille or Morse code. The thinly colored ink and gouache *Independent of Mind but Not Recklessly So* recalls the abstract calligraphy of the French poet Henri Michaux.

To look at the work of these artists is to be reminded of how vital and evocative abstract art can be. Far from being cold or remote, the work pulses—and in Zarem's case, explodes—with sensations that engage not only the eyes but also the mind and the body. The pieces here are as "realistic" as anything—they draw their sustenance from our everyday perception and experience of the world, from the unnoticed or barely noticed at the root of the visible.

(I adopt these ideas from the British philosopher of art Paul Crowther, whose writing offers a richly sustained examination of what it is that makes pictures so meaningful.)

Two years ago, Corners Gallery owner Ariel Bullion Ecklund embarked on an expansion project aimed at upgrading her business—long primarily a frame shop—into one of Ithaca's leading fine arts galleries. To that end, she acquired an adjacent space, had the wall knocked out, and had it renovated

as a dedicated gallery room.

For “Starts,” the room has been hung with a large number of small pieces from show’s titular series. The majority of these square sheets have been hung adjacently as informal diptychs, with most of these pairings counterbalancing one piece by each artist. They are mostly black-and-white but some have subtly—or not so subtly—colored areas. Most of the motifs echo those found in the artists’ larger works. But the combination of brevity and juxtaposition gives them a new life. (It would be interesting to see these pictures as a book.)

As well as a range of drawing and painting media, many of these incorporate simple printmaking techniques of the kind that can be done without a press: monotype, monoprint, woodblock and stamping.

All of the pairings are strong but a few in particular stand out. Among these:

A vertical, brushy, bright red stripe accents the otherwise black-and-white *This is How it Starts: Stare*. It shares Zarem’s right hand sheet with fluidly calligraphic black ink—alternately wet and blobby and dry-brushed. Nicol’s left section is filled with irregular woodblock printed black shapes that diminish in size as the gaze moves down. It suggests a collection of disassembled US states arranged in the manner of an eye chart.

This is How it Starts: Holler combines a sheet on the left by Nicol with one on the right by Zarem. The white dots and strands—against black—that make up Nicol’s block-printed contribution form something like a chaotic wreath. The fine hatches and fuzzy balls that make up Zarem’s seem to be joining to form a giant cluster. (Here as elsewhere Zarem’s work calls to mind the prints of contemporary artist Julie Mehretu.)

Paper is a particularly flexible and inviting surface for picture making and both Nicol and Zarem are doing marvelous, surprising things on it. This is a rich, intelligent exhibit filled with work to get absorbed and lost in. *