

# RICHMOND

by Deborah McLeod

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TANJA SOFTIC's "Recent Works on Paper" (Marsh Gallery, University of Richmond, October 21 – December 17) offers sustenance on many levels of perception, providing a particularly rare degree of sensual and intellectual satisfaction. Softic's two- and three-dimensional drawings and prints, as well as a single sculptural floor installation, take full advantage of the plastic relationship between paper and pigment. Softic uses artifacts from the natural world to covertly express her potent cultural themes. Her works on paper are autobiographical as well as biographical, explained in botanical terms and in a richly textured, somber and complex manner that furthers their contemplative, melancholy but transcendent tone. Softic's essential message expresses the effects of time, change, loss and how these systems of experience are remembered in human terms as well as in nature. Her highly developed surfaces offer a tarnished mystery and burnished texture as they intimate an intertwining coexistence of historical memory and personal translation.

Though born and raised in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, Softic, who occasionally writes for this publication, is presently a resident of the United States and an associate professor of art at the University of Richmond. While she was earning her MFA in the States, war broke out in her homeland, permanently altering its identity and changing the course of her life. In the years since that event, her work has developed to consider her own memories, the remains of altered history but also the industry of regeneration. (Her work was very recently exhibited under the title "Memory Folios" at the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia in Virginia Beach.)

Softic's studies of pods, shells, orchid blooms, heart ventricles, spinal columns and rib cages are juxtaposed with architectural fragments and geometric shapes. They are rendered with a hoary, burnished texture that delves deeply into the surface of the paper. The artist prepares her archaeological site layer upon layer as though she herself were geologic time, obscuring past fallen forms in order to accommodate newer ones. Softic introduces a vigorous negative space that floats upon the uppermost surface, a commanding yet unarticulated presence. Sometimes this negative space is simply a chill rectangular void. At other times it is a revisitation of the pod in solid black, or it suggests a conch in iron red silhouette. In their final state, all of the drawings are scrimms of present and past rendered in charcoal and acrylic pigment, or as prints in etching, drypoint, and

mezzotint.

In every composition Softic´ reveals a certain connection to modernism, both in form and artistic tone, although the work is at home in postmodernism. Whether this inclination appears in the dense monolithic rectangle that presides over many of her nature studies or emerges more discreetly in an underlying grid structure, the inclination to order is apparent. It organizes the silent litany of natural profusion, the consummated forms that the artist has relocated from the forest or the floor of the sea to the scientist's examination table and then into her images. Softic´ regenerates these departures by making them sources for the not yet known. The artist's array of barren pods and vacated shells, however, are never absolutely determined as vacated forms. They are much too vigorous, with their animated petals, stems and tentacles or activated patterns that propose continual motion and life-inducing energy. Whether juxtaposed with a glowing duplicate of itself, or animated through sequence, one is made aware that these vestigial objects' roles are not yet over.top