

The Boston Globe

GALLERIES

‘Pushing Painting’ presents the medium’s possibilities

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DAVID WINTON BELL GALLERY, BROWN UNIV.
Elise Ansel’s “Bacchus and Ariadne (Unpopulated)”

PROVIDENCE — The past meets the onrush of the present in “Pushing Painting,” a delicious exhibition organized as three solo shows by curator Ian Alden Russell at Brown University’s David Winton Bell Gallery.

Elise Ansel reinterprets works by Old Masters, breaking their stories open into passages of pure, gestural color. In “Bacchus and Ariadne (Unpopulated)” she blurs Titian’s “Bacchus and Ariadne” into big, sumptuous brush strokes, reducing Ariadne to a vertical swipe of blue. Bacchus and his raucous coterie disappear completely.

Yet the opulent tones and joyful gestures carry the energy of the moment as Bacchus, suddenly in love, leaps from his carriage. Ansel doesn’t repudiate narrative with abstraction in the manner of her modernist forefathers. Indeed, “abstraction” seems the wrong word. Her strokes don’t flatten masterworks into formal notions, but caress and celebrate their forms, as a lover might, so they blossom anew.

Duane Slick, a member of the Meskwaki and Ho-Chunk nations, seeds the modernist grid with Native American spirits. A ghostly coyote mask hovers over bands of dry, earthy gray and green behind the shifting grid in “Ocular Apparition.” The mask is more resonance than face, trapped yet vanishing.

In “A Voice From the Prairie Grass,” stripes of blue and white crisscrossing over gray and green fields read as a matrix for time’s eternal repetitions. Slick scatters them with pale sprigs of grain and shadowlike silhouettes of a coyote and a rabbit, tenuous but potent.

Nicole Duennebier’s paintings imagine undersea life in the manner of 17th-century Dutch still lifes, heaving with ravishing abundance. Gauzy sacs of red and white festoon a mountain of translucent crimson pearls in “Scintillating Organism.” Is the viscid mountain growing or decaying? Is it overtaking its environment?

The artist has another show, “View Into the Fertile Country,” up through July 13 at 13FOREST Gallery in Arlington. Like her Dutch predecessors, Duennebier’s glistening realism captures bounty and menace, allure and mortification. Unlike them, she offers no moral instruction — just astonishment at paint’s possibilities.

PUSHING PAINTING

At David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, 64 College St.,
Providence, through July 8. 401-863-
2932, www.brown.edu/bellgallery