

PAINTING

the town

BY MELISSA STARKER
PHOTO BY WILL SHILLING

When Daina Higgins started working with spray paint, she was far from a studio setting. The Brooklyn-based Columbus native first honed her skills with aerosol in the male-dominated world of high-end graffiti, risking her neck for especially tempting surfaces and making a name in competitions.

As she developed her talents through summer studies in Chicago and New York and the BFA program at Brooklyn's prestigious Pratt Institute, Higgins never lost her love for the medium. And she developed a desire to see it showcased in a gallery setting, in a way that stretched beyond the simple transfer of street art to a canvas.

Her own approach turns the tables. Instead of creating spray art on buildings, she creates spray art of buildings, simultaneously evoking some of what draws graffiti artists to the practice—the beauty of a big city at night.

Several views of her historic, constantly changing adopted hometown are currently on display at Rebecca Ibel's Miranova Gallery, in a two-person show that also features perfect geometric patterns in paint by fellow Brooklynite Sylvan Lionni.

"I really started with wanting to bring spray paint indoors," Higgins explained. She started playing around with French curves and other old graphic design templates that had been given to her by an uncle, then began creating her own stencils to depict scenes from life.

Her process involves 30 to 50 layers of stenciling and requires about 12 to 24 hours of labor, on a canvas no bigger than 12 by 18 inches. (She believes that working larger would distract from "the nature of the paint.")

"There were lots of people at first," she said. "Then I just shifted focus, became more involved in the constructed environment."

Though the work became less figurative, Higgins did keep her interest in human interaction, homing in on the give-and-take between people, the massive things they construct and the surrounding elements of nature.

Higgins first showed her work with Ibel in 2003, a sampling of monochrome, almost photorealistic images of the New York streets. Her current pieces continue to recall the pointillism of Georges Seurat (a favorite of Higgins) and the atmospheric grain of film noir, and over time she's let color infiltrate.

"Taking pictures at night [to work from], I don't know how long to leave the shutter open and I'll experiment for different effects," Higgins said. "The color of night in photos is very surreal, a dusky, dark mauve. The film does its own thing with the color and I like that."

She finds her subject matter by trawling Forgotten-NY.com for historically interesting neighborhoods and randomly visiting unfamiliar parts of town by train.

Among the cityscapes in the new series are a couple of works that have an eerie double exposure quality, the result of reflections cast in the store windows along Coney Island Avenue. One seems to suggest that there's a giant precipice across the street from a dress shop; another illustrates the wedding cake in a bakery window in garish neon green.

While her attachment to spray art remains strong, Higgins has given up her practice of it outside the studio, between her fears that graffiti artists could become a Homeland Security target in post-9/11 New York and the acceptance of her own fallibility.

"I've broken bones and things like that," she said. "I consider myself lucky. I know people who haven't been as



Daina Higgins

lucky, and those things work on you."

But Higgins stressed that she doesn't want to be defined by this work and its distinctive style. "I don't want people to think I'm a photorealist painter," she said. "I'm not going to work this way forever."

The artist has already branched out, presenting dream-like ceramic houses at an earlier Ibel show and several watercolors on paper with her canvases this month. They're much different than her signature work but striking in their own right, as they share the same recognizable marks of Higgins' dexterous hand and intense attention to detail.

DAINA HIGGINS & SYLVAN LIONNI

WHEN: Through January 31
WHERE: Rebecca Ibel Miranova
Gallery, Downtown
Web: rebeccabel.com

The gallery will host an opening reception on January 11. On January 13, Daina Higgins and the Columbus Museum of Art's Joe Houston will lead a gallery talk at Ibel's Short North location.