

T'burg's Wali Cultivates Her Own Aesthetic Garden

Arthur Whitman

Intimate, idiosyncratic approaches characterize a great deal of contemporary abstract painting and drawing. Freed from the heroic imperatives of historical abstraction, recent artists have felt free to cultivate aesthetic gardens on their own terms. Neither revolutionaries nor populists, they persist, often as artists' artists working in isolation from broader currents of contemporary art and popular culture.

Working on modestly scaled sheets of paper in ink, graphite, and other materials, Trumansburg's transplant

Achala Wali is a welcome addition to the region's art. A small show of her work, "Surface Densities," is currently in its final week at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse.



Wali is one of six artists chosen for this year as part of the museum's new CNY Artist Initiative. Open to submissions from artists residing within a 75-mile radius of Syracuse, the exhibitions program promises to expand the museum's longstanding commitment to regional art.

Indian by birth and cultural heritage, Wali is a seventies-era B.F.A. graduate of Syracuse University. She has lived and worked in New York City and in Cleveland. Following her retirement from her job of many years at the Cleveland Museum of Art, she returned to the Central New York in 2019.

Completed since her move and selected together with museum curator Steffi Chappell, her Everson exhibit samples several series. On the evidence here, the artist is a master of grisaille, deriving palpable weight and nuance from her subtly color-inflected fields of gray.

A key with art of this sort is to embrace all the metaphorical and cultural associations that one comes upon without becoming too hung up on any of them.

Many contemporary abstractionists have cultivated an interest in the natural sciences. Wali comes from a scientific and intellectual family. (Her father was a respected professor of physics at SU.) As far as I know, none of her pieces use mathematical composition nor illustrates any particular scientific phenomena. Her patient, methodical approach, and abstracted allusions to natural and manmade worlds, however, suggests what one might consider a science fiction.

Likewise, although none of Wali's work makes overt reference to map-making, her densely rendered images have a kinship with a group of cartography-inspired contemporary artists. Her slowly improvised work combines the schematic and the painterly in a way that recalls the topographical emphasis and imaginary worldmaking of these artists.

Wali's paintings conflate intimate bodily experience with free-floating residues of cultural memory. This is true of all her work here but it is signaled quite literally in pieces from two series.

Adapting a distinctive modeling of human hair found in Archaic Greek statues, "Arachaea," "Study," and "Tumble Over" are covered in densely tangled, tendril-like curls. Subtle, atmospheric washes and fills of tone and color enliven the artist's tight line drawing. A silvery, shivering background suffuses the first, perhaps most striking piece.

Recalling the distinctively elongated ears in traditional depictions of the Buddha, another series turns these paperclip or embryo-like forms into a repetitive motif. In “The Taj Fate,” one of the few wide format pieces here, they join a gridded arrangement of graphite dots and clouds of pink- and blue-purple ink. Adding to the stylized, palimpsest feel, are scattered strips of collaged text—Marathi, from the library of her late linguist mother Kashi Wali, a noted expert on the South Asian language.

A recently reworked collaboration with the deceased Cleveland artist John Jackson, “Eclipse” is the show’s most memorable piece. Soaked in tea before being worked up in layers, a warm glow underlies the otherwise mostly black and gray piece. An irregular, pulsating grid of cut-out-like ovals gives the piece the feeling of a screen while hairy arabesques suggest a less controlled movement.

Though inevitable, given the size of the allotted gallery, I was left wanting to see more of this complex, intriguing work.

“Achala Wali: Surface Densities”

Through August 7

Everson Museum of Art at 401 Harrison Street, Syracuse, NY