

Shifting perspectives; landscape by number

By Cate McQuaid | THE BOSTON GLOBE
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Sandy Litchfield positions herself as a latter-day cubist in her show "What Blooms in the Rubble," at Carroll and Sons. Deploying paint, collage, and digital manipulation of imagery, she shifts perspectives in her works. Space flattens, fractures, and telescopes. The world appears to shatter. Yet amid all that chaos there's a peculiar elasticity of form. Even color and light seem stretchable.

This artist's technique is formidable. She manipulates layers upon layers of imagery and mediums, both virtual and tangible; a splash of color might be paint, or a digital image of paint, or something completely fabricated on the computer.

But her workaday subject matter is often too obvious: crumbling homes, piles of debris, demolition sites. One wonders if she lit on these not because they're visually arresting, but because they signify her theme. "Poppies" grabbed me, but it was the drooping orange blooms -- torn paper on the surface, images in the digital print -- not the central jumbled trash heap that caught my eye.



Litchfield is at her best when her disorder is open-ended. Her cityscape, "Forestrocity," swells and ripples. She tears and cuts along the edges to make it look in places like an unfinished jigsaw puzzle. Imagery on both sides puts us in a bleached-out forest, but the middle captures the energy of a vast city at night. Skyscrapers have a bauble glow. Everything blurs; forms shudder, as if all that's solid is giving way to smears of lemon-lime light.

Flying black grids shrink and expand across the surface, an afterimage of the city lights. The multidimensional web, as illusory as the fuzzy illumination, reaches naturally into the woody edges, integrating the natural with the manmade. The implosion in works such as these is less literal than in her other pieces, and more wide-open -- the maw of possibility.

Exploring the land

Over the years, the printmaker Yizhak Elyashiv has gone from diagrammatic abstraction based on chance -- he'd toss a handful of rice, say, onto his printing plate and chart the grains -- to a deep consideration of landscape. It's not that far a leap. In his show at Gallery NAGA, he still applies discrete gestures and algorithms to his work, all as a means of exploring the land.

"Untitled (#4)," for instance, conveys rolling hills in swarms of small, smudgy engraved marks. Elyashiv writes in his artist's statement about working in Ireland, and studying the history of the potato famine. "Sulfuric fields," he writes, were said to stink with the scent of rotting spuds.

It's hard not to see those spent potatoes in these sooty marks. Then, some rise from the landscape into the air, like ocean spray over a wave. The artist draws fine lines networking the smudges, and writes numbers, counting from zero to nine again and again throughout the print in pink watercolor. The numbers and lines come across as the artist's attempt to apprehend the land, and all the history and sorrow that it holds.

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Also at Gallery NAGA, Louis Risoli's dense, smart, joyful paintings include five big triangular canvases bubbling with pattern and demented hues, and one grid of smaller rectangular paintings filling a wall. "Edie," a triangular piece well over 5 feet tall, sports intersecting circles. Risoli fills the overlaps with swipes of lime green and peachy cream. The parts that don't overlap are white, but they blush like schoolgirls.

"Let $X=X$," the grid of paintings, is full of delights. On one checkerboard of deep pink squares, the surface crimps and rumples, and in places rises as if there are jar lids embedded beneath. Another shows yellow diamonds on a red-gingham type background; the diamond in the middle looks like thick frosted glass, with shadows and streaks beneath it.

These painterly, off-kilter works and their juicy patterns suggest textiles, and microbial cross sections you might see through a microscope. Patterns are everywhere; we're in them, and tied to each other by them. Risoli's work celebrates that.

Rows of ephemera

With their luxuriant tones, Nancy Natale's mixed-media encaustic works at Arden Gallery have something in common with Risoli's paintings, although they're more contemplative and less exuberantly freaky.

Natale nails onto a panel long rows of ephemera -- book spines, snippets of musical notation, handwritten notes, shreds of album covers -- along with slats of copper, rubber, and more. They jitter over the surface along a given theme -- "Symphonie Fantastique," for instance, celebrates Henry Mancini's theme to the "Pink Panther" movies -- and she selectively coats them in pigmented wax. Pink, in this case.

The Pink Panther piece is light and fun, but Natale goes deeper in larger works, such as the ruby-toned "This American Time," one of the rare pieces here that features vertical as well as horizontal slats. The verticals give the piece a syncopated rhythm. The result is nearly musical.

The content includes red-mottled strips of handwriting, white slots with black decorative and gestural loops, and an ad declaring, "These men are building lifetime businesses!" There's something ruminative about all these elements together. They may not seem connected, but they coalesce into something fervent, intimate, and hopeful.