Ornate, pushy, celebratory — yet all compatible

By Cate McQuaid
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“Simpatico” is a delicious new exhibition at Boston University Art Gallery at the Stone Gallery. The artists are all hands-on, playing with luscious materials, creating voluptuously messy but astutely designed works. And it’s all abstract art, as if the no-holds-barred quality of abstraction were an invitation to roll in the pigment, to dare to get ugly, to throw on the glitter.

They’re also all women, which goes unmentioned in any of the show’s promotional materials, probably because Kate McNamara, the gallery’s director and chief curator, isn’t out to put together a “women’s” show. That would be passé, a throwback to the days when women needed to mount their own exhibits to get attention. The artists in “Simpatico” have taken on the expressive methods of action painting, which in the mid-20th century was a movement that often specialized in depicting a hero; if sometimes tormented, masculinity.

The works in “Simpatico” are celebratory. The centerpiece is Polly Apfelbaum’s “Miss America,” two lengths of red-carpet-sized umbrellas unfurled on the floor. It’s not a painting, although it refers to painting, as everything in this show does, in its attention to color and surface. The fabric is studded with glittering sequins that sparkle and set off ripples of winking neon rainbows as you walk past.

Set half a dozen girls with their Barbie dolls loose, and they’d have a wall with “Miss America.”

Dona Nelson, born in 1947, is the matriarch of “Simpatico.” Her two-sided painting “Pool Side” is a knockout. She doesn’t care that the so-called verso side shows the bare-wood canvas stretcher and staples. Both sides are streaked and dotted with blue-green paint, so shadowed and dripped on, so spackled. Great expanses of yellow spread over the front, like the sun gleaming on pool water. A knotty snake of grey mud takes off like a kite from a strand of blue paint on the front and wraps around the back, where it forks open — a nervy push of a painterly painting into the realm of sculpture.

The artists in “Simpatico” are unabashed, reveling in their materials. Laurel Sparks has left behind the chandelier template she’s been using for years and surrendered to a grid full of triangles and text into violent gesture in a deep, rusty red, which Frankfort tops off with a warm, regal sheen of gold.

For all the abandonment to the material, which would not do a finger-painter proud, there’s also an austere sense of design in these works. Joanne Greenbaum and Carrie Moyer (who trained in graphic design) apply pigment and line to their large, sharp-torted canvases in myriad ways, playing with pattern, texture, and space. It’s true, too, of ceramist Nicole Cherubini, who leaves her fingerprints dimpled in works such as “Gorda Mountain,” a vessel built out of a clay grid, dripping red, but frames it carefully in a wooden hexagon.

There’s nothing tortured about the art in “Simpatico.” It’s a sophisticated romp, a joy ride through the sensual delights of making art.

Witty and awakened

Cherubini pairs with Beverly Semmes for a show at Samson, venturing out of her clay comfort zone to exhibit drawings. They’re small, rapturous, bright-toned pieces in which the artist deploys a variety of techniques and textures, betraying the strong influence of artists such as Moye.

They pull you in. Cherubini has wittily displayed “Wood Heat” flat in a square case, so as to eliminate the question of orientation — any side could be top or bottom, so the form seems to spin, unanchored. There’s a rush of blue-rimmed red over a creamy black of black and peach at the center, around which cooler blues puddle and streak. Some postcard bits of blue pucker, and in one there’s a field of rolling teal craters. All these little details make for a nuanced topography.

Semmes is known for her installation work using the dress form, but here she’s painting over clips from such magazines as “Playboy” and “Hustler” and large-scale photographs. “Slippers” features a cutout from one of the magazines. It shows a woman seated in a come-lately pose, but Semmes has covered her with a lively blot of yellow fringed with little orange curls along one side. We see only the model’s face peering through a hole in the paint, and her legs. Even her high-heeled slippers have subtly painted add-ons.

These works are sometimes comic, but often violent. The artist paints with an energized, feathery stroke, but the painted-over women look almost expurgated, often with only arms or hands remaining visible. Semmes is appropriating and obscuring objects of desire so that we can’t see them. It amplifies the sense that these women can’t be seen for who they are — they are all just what we project onto them, which in this case is paint. It’s a rude awakening, after frolicking in the playground of abstraction with Cherubini and her cohorts in “Simpatico.”

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