Seeing a traditional genre through a fresh lens

By Cate McQuaid
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There seems to be no end lately to painters pushing beyond the flat surface of the canvas into three dimensions. In her canny show "Shifting Horizon" at Samson, Lisa Sigal immingles painting into architecture's realm. Her works begin with one of painting's most traditional genres, the landscape, but she invites us to see desolate urban landscapes through a fresh lens.

Sigal utilizes building materials, abstraction, and space to simultaneously place us within the landscape and distance us from it. These are complex, multilayered pieces. At the center of "Hinged Painting (City of Vernon)" hangs an image of a walled-off, deserted lot. It looks like a painting in fading, sun-bleached tones; in fact, it's a photo printed on Tyvek. The fibers in that synthetic material recall brushstrokes.

A door-sized frame of metal studs — the arms you'd find behind drywall in a contemporary building — backs the landscape. A narrow vertical screen joins the piece, painted with orange and black horizontal bands. These crisscross and overlap blocks of orange Sigal has painted on the Tyvek and in an open area behind the metal studs.

The striped screen has an almost Op-Art effect. Look through it, and elements of the painting emerge and disappear. Indeed, the entire piece vitiates between polarized points: The flat blocks of orange play against the moment screen; abstraction vies against representation; the outside depicted in the photo rubs up against the deep internal structure implied by the metal studs. It's a painting, a sculpture, a photograph, a part of the architecture.

The way Sigal constructs her works compels us to look at sites we habitually ignore. She renews abandoned places, ignored and ugly places. She does not make them beautiful. She simply makes us see.

Pop-up exhibition

Two painters who have known each other for more than 40 years have taken on the pop-up exhibition model on a huge scale. Sheffield van Buren and Katherine Porter went to Harvard University looking for a space to rent and ended up in a 5,000-square-foot warehouse in Allston.

The space, van Buren said in an interview, "was pretty decrepit" when he first saw it. "We had to pull out a dumpster and back half full of junk," he said. A new wall was installed and the place was painted. Rather than put permanent track lighting for a temporary exhibition, light artist John Powell illuminated their paintings by framing groups of pictures within its rectangles.

The space is a terrific showcase for their art. Porter's brushy, gestural, commandingly colored paintings, such as the large, exuberant "José de Verrazano" (1985) bristle and clash with her trademark lexicon of abstract shapes: circles, spirals, colliding geometric planes. Although Porter loves the materiality of her paint, her main concern is pictorial: The tensions she creates among her forms amass unease, even in the most seductive of tones, even in the party atmosphere of some of her canvases.

Van Buren's works focus less on picture, and more on surface. How is the interruption of flatness a violation, and how is it an opening? In a handful of watercolors dominated by harsh clusters of lines, he diggs holes and gashes violently into the page.

Then, in his enchanting "Ambient Light" series of paintings, he coats each square canvas with a creamy pale tone — peach, vio- let, blue — glossy, nearly luminous. He affixes sheets of what look like Hersey's Kisses wrappers. Sometimes he crowns them on, and they resemble a swarm of silvery starlings. Sometimes they are just spare flecks, drifting over the surface — little explosions of light, the most delicate of appreciations.

The view from inside

Unlike Lisa Sigal's works, which contrast outside with interior, "INTERIORS" the group show of modern and contemporary Productviewpainters at Acme Fine Art, places the viewer firmly inside. But inside can be a maze in itself. Look at the tartan-painted walls of Shanti Prower's Land. The confined space in Land's "Orange Staircase" (c. 1999) seems to seep and telescope. Shafts of light, a forested blue ceiling, a wall scoured with olive paint, and more make the eye dart. You wouldn't want to stand in that hallway — I'd get dizzy — but I didn't want to stop looking at it.

Then there's Mary Hackett's doll "Deck of Emma Bakke," from 1653. A woman sits in a deck chair, reading, beside an enormous, red-threaded ventilation pipe. She wears socks with her sandal. She's on deck, but still apparently inside, as the windows in the wall behind her look out toward other ships. Despite the glamour of shipboard, she looks as if she'd rather be home.

You can still smell the paint on Samuel Mesi's "Dreaming of You, Dreaming of the Dogs," depicting a blond woman and three white poodles. Mesi is a realist with a dreamy medium, which he lays on thicker than cream cheese. He seems to reach his pictures out of paint the way a sculptor finds his form in stone. Paint is the flesh of the painting, but there are ghosts here, too — a window behind the woman reveals a sparsely sketched cityscape and bridge, as if outside this room, beyond this woman and her dogs, life is just a dream.

Lisa Sigal: Shifting Horizon
At Samson, 450 Harrison Ave., through May 25. 617-357-7177.
www.samsonprojects.com

Katherine Porter, Sheffield van Buren
At 100 Melston St., Allston, through May 31. www.sheffieldvanburen.com

INTERIORS
At: Acme Fine Art, 38 Newbury St., through May 25. 617-965-9551.
www.acmefineart.com

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