Mounting a comeback

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT
JANUARY 13, 2010

OLGA ANTONOVA: Recent Paintings
PAT LASCH: Cake Sculptures
At: Beth Urdang Gallery, 129 Newbury St., through Feb. 9.
MARY ARMSTRONG
At: Victoria Munroe Fine Art, 161 Newbury St., through Jan. 30. 617-523-0661,
www.victoriamunroefineart.com
STEVE LOCKE: RAPTURE/ New Work
At: Samson, 450 Harrison Ave., through Jan. 30. 617-357-7177,
www.samsonprojects.com

Several art dealers have closed up shop and left Newbury Street in the last year and a half. Some said they hoped to come back. Now Beth Urdang has.

Last week, Urdang moved back into the building she left in June 2008. “I am so excited,” she says. “I always knew I would be back.”

That summer, there was a wave of moves and closings, as many art dealers reached the end of their leases. More galleries shuttered as the economy went under. In Urdang’s case, new owners had bought the building at 129 Newbury St., and she says they did not renew her sublease because they planned to develop condos.

“I thought I’d take the summer off, look for a space in the fall,” Urdang says. “Then the recession hit, and I worked as a private art dealer from home, but I kept looking at spaces.”

She recently found one near her home in Wellesley, and signed on short-term. Just as she mounted an exhibition there, she heard the owners of 129 Newbury were open to commercial leases.

“How I’ve got two galleries, and I’m thrilled,” says Urdang, who thinks it’s a good time to come back. “I get the feeling that places are being rented,” Urdang adds. “The worst is over. That’s my sense.”

Urdang’s two exhibitions on Newbury Street are exquisitely rendered and easy on the eyes. Olga Antonova’s still life paintings explore pattern, design, and the reflective power of porcelain. In “Cup Pyramid on Turquoise,” a haphazard stack of teacups may look like a jumble, but Antonova artfully conveys the delicacy and character of each one. A tall, lavender, cylindrical cup sits at the top, a shaft of light shining on it. It looks a bit like a flower’s stamen, with the rest
of the cups forming graceful, if varied, petals around it.

Sculptor Pat Lasch, whose father was a baker, makes cakes. The delectable pieces, made of wood and decorated with acrylic, are each about 5 inches square. They’re an unusual and provocative mix of Pop Art (Claes Oldenburg’s “Profiterole” comes to mind) and something more baroque, with ornate flourishes and lattices. One is topped with a bouquet of purple rosettes circled with grassy strands of silver. A chocolate cake sports a drapery design around its sides, pink rosettes on top, and a delicately drizzled chocolate doily beneath. They’re mouth-watering.

**Into the dream**

Mary Armstrong’s luminous mixed-media works on paper recall, in their smoldering and heavenly tones, her last exhibition at Victoria Munroe Fine Art, which took off from maps of Venice. Most of the new pieces are in a more standard landscape format, but Armstrong continues to delve into representations of space, inscribing grids that seem to cascade toward us from a distant point over her images of sea, sky, and mountain range.

“The Floating World Geography Lesson” features a cloud-scuffed sky wedged between two golden plains, rendered across four sheets of paper. Through the sky, she has scored orange lines, fanning out from above and crossing horizontally, flattening the atmosphere into something planar. Another grid appears at the bottom, making that expanse look like a football field. The sense is that Armstrong has made a diagram of space over the real thing, but of course the painting is no less a depiction than the diagram.

But these are not just conceptual riffs on how we perceive space. Even while Armstrong carefully alerts us to how fictive her works are, breaking each one up across several sheets and laying a diagram or two down, her paint handling is so gorgeous, her colors so romantic and vital, the viewer tips easily into the dream she weaves with her imagery. But in that dream, a golden grid glimmers in the sky, or crawls over mountains, and we are in a satisfyingly confounding world indeed, albeit a beautiful one.

**Every man for himself**

In his painted portraits and a 13-panel lithograph at samson, Steve Locke examines the way men look, and don’t look, at one another, the way they jockey for position, the way they flirt.

The lithograph piece, “RAPTURE,” sensuous with smudges and shadows, features images of men, or the suggestion of men as clothes hang on for them, engaging in sexual activities. Elegantly drawn, hypnotic, and sad, the lithographs depict men clearly moving with partners, but they never show the partners. Although Locke does occasionally layer figures to suggest a couple, the feeling is still that of every man for himself.

If Locke is striving for religious commentary, referring to the Christian concept of the Rapture, it’s a clumsy reach. In another piece, a neon sign flashes “God is love” and follows it up with “you little...” and a derogatory word for a gay man. No subtlety in that irony. Locke should stick to figure work.

He is a deft painter, able to convey often opaque facial expressions with few brushstrokes. His groups of portraits, such as “I had so far to fall,” evince, like “RAPTURE,” a series of essentially glancing interchanges. He paints a lonely picture.