

BEYOND APPEARANCES

Women Printmakers at Stewart Gallery

By CHRISTOPHER SCHNOOR

For a retreat from the heat this summer I would recommend the cool sanctum of Stewart Gallery (2230 W. Main), wherein resides an exhibition of three remarkable, nationally-known women artists whose innovative and beautifully crafted works on paper provide a taste of what is new in printmaking today. Gallery owner Stephanie Wilde (a highly regarded print artist in her own right) has a keen eye for sophisticated workmanship and fresh aesthetics as the selections here demonstrate. What the show's title "Beyond Appearances" suggests is that these works offer a unique visual experience, offering a glimpse outside the familiar and the apparent, witnessing the expanding vocabulary of the print art form. The editions are limited to a few or one of a kind, enhancing their special status.

Jeanine Coupe Ryding's captivating woodcuts are printed mostly on Stonehenge paper which has a smooth surface

similar to vellum that to the eye gives her pieces a rich, warm consistency. This Evanston, Illinois artist's fanciful abstract shapes are, in her words, "the distillation of [personal] experiences, thoughts and relationships."

Ryding's cleverly designed oval and irregular forms float upon (or within) streams of small striations and seed-like markings, a calligraphy that gives her compositions a sense of teeming microscopic worlds. On the other hand, the forms in her grand, larger works like the striking Red Eclipse have a monumentality to them, a characteristic that informs some of the medium size compositions as well. And while Ryding's hues can be quite vibrant, as seen here in "Firefly," for the most part her palette is soft-spoken yet rich. Altogether, we feel in the midst of a wonderfully colored realm of perpetual motion.

Seattle painter and printmaker Betty Merken presents with a selection of works on paper from her "Illumination

Series" which explores the inherent luminosity of color, examining how it interacts with light. Using an oil-based monotype technique which makes for more painterly surfaces, Merken creates minimal abstractions of an exquisite nature which validate what has been described as her "intuitive sensibility." It has been noted that artists influencing her art include Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt and likely hard edge and color-field masters. However, given Merken's interest in how light affects color, I would add to that list as a probable soulmate the painter-turned-installation artist Robert Irwin. Irwin's ventures into light-infused perceptual experiences can be seen as a precursor to her Intervals series of monotypes. For instance, Merken's "Intervals XXVI" and "Intervals VI #04-13-06" in this exhibit echo the ambient illumination and its impact on color that Irwin's fluorescent tubes achieved.

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4 Standing sentry over Merken's wall pieces are two 3-dimensional works by the artist. These cantilevered stacks of 4-inch square, deckle-edged Rives paper, one set hand-inked ruby red, the other amethyst purple, sit precariously on anodized aluminum plinths. Both a clever balancing act and elegant exclamation, they are an unexpected coda to her exhibit.

The third artist represented here is the Berkeley, California-based German artist Christel Dillbohner who has been represented in Boise by Stewart Gallery for many years, and exhibits around the U.S. and Germany. She is at home in a variety of mediums and art forms including abstract painting, printmaking, sculpture, multi-media installations and assemblages. Although Dillbohner's sources are often literary and intellectual her work remains for the most part earthbound, referencing physical and anthropological landscapes, recording environmental and cultural encounters. She is a curious, inventive artist, good at ferreting out the creative possibilities inherent in unusual materials and techniques.

Case in point is Dillbohner's series of five multi-media prints on BFK Rives paper



COURTESY OF STEWART GALLERY
Christel Dillbohner's "Hortus Conclusus."

which are, in a very real sense, photographs. They are the product of a photographic printing process called cyanotype, which for years was used to make blueprints. She creates eerie reproductions of plants, flowers, thistles, and branches by laying the specimens on chemically treated printing paper and leaving them exposed outdoors to the sun's ultraviolet light long enough to transfer their images onto the paper, producing in effect a negative imprint ("capturing their shadows" she calls it.) The print is rinsed, dried and cured, then Dillbohner colors and enhances the image with brushed-on oil medium to produce a ghostly presence like an aquatic mirage, concurrently familiar yet mysterious (see her "Underwater Gardens #3"). The series is entitled Hortus Conclusus, Latin for "enclosed garden," a medieval refuge-from-the-world motif with Old Testament connotations. It is this artist's way of giving recognition and meaning to the past "year of sheltering" we have experienced.

All three artists have written short essays on their respective works which are available to read, along with images of the art itself, in the online exhibition catalog available for viewing at www.stewartgallery.com through the end of July.