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Urban fragments isolated in artist's 'Abstractions'

By **Fredric Koepfel**
Contact
February 17, 2006

Hamlet claimed to count himself a king of infinite space inside a nutshell, and William Blake saw the world in a grain of sand.

Susan Maakestad's frame of reference is rather larger than those minuscule or miniature representations of the cosmos, but paintings that measure 15 by 15 inches to 18 by 20 inches are still pretty small planes upon which to suggest boundless reaches. That Maakestad, who is on the faculty at Memphis College of Art, accomplishes this feat with concentration and seeming aplomb makes "Urban Abstractions," her exhibition at Clough Hanson Gallery, both provocative and gratifying.

The paradox of the exhibition title is neat: By abstracting urban settings, the artist practically does away with them, and while retaining the kernel of inspiration -- a parking lot, a sidewalk, an intersection -- she scrubs away the extraneous. What's left is a spectacular sense of distance and a feeling that the sublime in the old style -- say, the endless skies and forests and mountains tinged with the Manifest Destiny of the 19th Century Hudson River School -- survives in a manner that is more wry, knowing and self-effacing.

Maakestad takes her ubiquitous urban fragments and isolates them, so sidewalks that front no houses stretch into a nothingness represented by a dark line of water (a recurring visual and psychological motif) and parking lots lacking automobiles fade into eternity under vivid skies. In "Parking Space," that simple, utilitarian, universal form, defined here by a lopsided "caution" grid, occupies what seems to be the desolate blankness of a desert that slopes up to a grassy area; no other parking space is to be seen, and far in the distance is the gray of sky fading into clouds.

While Maakestad gently plays tricks with our senses of expectation, appropriateness and perspective, she is exercising painting and color skills that any artist in town would envy. To be fully appreciated, these 12 small paintings -- there are eight watercolors, too -- must be looked at from as far away as possible and from as close as one can get without the eyes crossing and the image blurring, and every point in-between. Maakestad's surfaces offer sly depth and complication, built from under- and over-painting, from scraping and scumbling.

A superb example is "Crosswalk #3," in which a swath of scumbled black over olive green makes a somber note next to a sweep of exhilarating egg-yolk yellow that shifts (moving right) toward lemon-yellow bearing a scrim of mottled pink, brown and mauve-gray. On the brighter yellow, by the black, lies a vibrant orange rectangle. The result is reckless, restless and profound and displays the artist's supreme self-confidence in her technical talent and her intuition. The landscape is, of course, abandoned, seemingly forgotten; no pedestrians cross the street in this crosswalk.

A similar effect is achieved in "Concrete," a bravura performance if an exhibition of small pieces allows for such a thing. We perceive this expanse of sea-front from a moderate height, as if we were looking from a window on the 10th floor of a nearby building. From that vantage we see a series of rigid extensions into the sea, the straight lines of engineered limitations, a vast curving breakwater enclosing a harbor or bay, a scene completely unpopulated by people, boats and buildings. Colors are dominated by a broad range of yellows and oranges and rusts with touches of blue, green and gray. The painting is brilliantly done but never flamboyant.

The works of human beings shape and alter the landscape, physically and psychically, yet the landscape shapes the efforts of human beings, too. In many senses, they mark and destroy each other, leaving, in these irresistibly attractive and disturbing images, fantasies of forsaken power and loneliness.

-- Fredric Koepfel, 529-2376



"Concrete": subtle but brilliantly done

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