

ART REVIEW: Mordecai's abstract works exude confidence at Trident

Monday Posted Aug 29, 2016 at 4:42 PM
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The wedge. The handle. The basket. A horizon line. The celestial circle. Recurring images in Ruth Mordecai's abstracts, on view now in a gorgeous new show at Trident Gallery, identify themselves easily. A quick gaze around the room makes these discrete symbols into comforting, dependable notions.

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

If you go...

WHAT: Ruth Mordecai: 'Works on Paper'

WHERE: Trident Gallery, 189 Main St., Gloucester

WHEN: through Sept. 5

ADMISSION: Free. www.tridentgallery.com or call 978-491-7785.

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Recurring images in Ruth Mordecai's abstracts, on view now in a gorgeous new show at Trident Gallery, identify themselves easily. A quick gaze around the room makes these discrete symbols into comforting, dependable notions.

Joining them all together, the artist builds an alluring, suggestive vocabulary — derived from the strength of her substantial body of work, but also immediately appealing, immediately meaningful, instantly offering the tranquility a viewer needs for investigation.

About two dozen recent works by the longtime Boston artist, who has worked on Cape Ann since 2000, fill the gallery. This is her second solo exhibition at Trident, and evidence that while the artist may have a dependable visual language, her work continues to move outward.

Absent here are the biblical reliances, the connection to Old Testament mythologies that informed Mordecai's previous Trident show, and much of her even earlier work. But the richly textured, sculptural quality to these paintings — collaged, with oil or acrylic on paper; mostly muted tones with heavy, assured outlines — remains.

These works are not restless. They make statements. At the center stand two large Homages — to the rarely seen sculptural reliefs of Henri Matisse. Matisse's own piece — actually four large reliefs — is a transformation on its own, moving from a suggestive nude of a woman's back, to an architectural set of cubist-like forms.

Mordecai then makes her own transformations, and renders the knowledge of Matisse's work a secondary concern. Matisse's spine becomes a wedge, and in Mordecai's first Homage the woman takes on the curves of stringed instrument. A solar circle also appears.

The subsequent Homage No. 2 becomes on an even greater abstraction — the wedge, the sun, still appearing. Like any genuine homage, Mordecai's work hardly derives from the original, but instead postulates it, and then moves away.

Although the two large Homages to Matisse claim prominence in the gallery, most of the show's other works also extend the idea of looking forward or backward. In many paintings, what other artists would offer as preliminary sketches, Mordecai shows in reverse. In the Black and White Series paintings (after No. 2, after No. 4, after No. 6), rudimentary geometric drawings “follow” more complex, larger paintings — the more elaborate original seeming to veer backwards toward simplicity.

In a way, it's like finding an unusual word in a poem, then looking it up in the dictionary. Complexity leads back to directness.

Multiple works suggest the ideation of traditional approaches. Like landscapes, certainly (a major work is titled just that — the beautiful “Landscape-Sculpture”). But still lifes as well — if “still” could translate to “pregnant,” and if the careful arrangements of the traditional style could be grasped as an idea of motion.

A gallery full of abstracts often drives viewers into convulsions of possible interpretation. Mordecai takes that on herself — her intentions are confident, personal; not hidden, but not transparent either. In any case, the viewer is released from the search for meaning. Released by the immediacy and the craft in these shapes, in this profoundly intelligent vocabulary.

Ruth Mordecai: Works on Papers remains on view through Sept. 5. For more information visit www.tridentgallery.com or call 978-491-7785.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR’s ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith; email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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