

ART REVIEW: Julia Shepley presents thought-provoking series of small works at Montserrat

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

Posted Jul 18, 2017 at 1:56 PM

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If you go...

WHAT: Julia Shepley: Sequential Prints

WHERE: Schlosberg Gallery, Montserrat College of Art, 23 Essex St., Beverly

WHEN: through Aug. 3

TICKETS: Free. Visit www.montserrat.edu or call 978-867-9604.

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Ten apparently simple woodcut collages are enough to tell a story.

Julia Shepley's "Sequential Prints," on view now at Montserrat College of Art's Schlosberg Gallery, seem at first glance to be quiet, monochromatic studies. Nocturnal in temperament, almost entirely blue/black with only hints of yellow or brown, these small works are mixed media: collaged wood cut prints, gently layered with paper, stitching, and diaphanous mesh fabric.

The images are not figurative, but not entirely abstract either. Call it gestural. Some hints recur: landscapes along the water — a dock, a boat, a jetty — sometimes a residence, most of it with a temporary feeling.

There are no human figures. The hangings — all small — have three dimensions, but they're not architectural. The gauze that creates depth only enhances the surface, not building on it.

Despite the title there is no sequence, at least not a directly narrative one. Most of the works come from her "Migrant" series — #1, #2, etc., not in order — with the expansive political implications that title implies, but without any further overt exploration into the theme.

Meaning falls secondarily to the artistic quality. These works are gorgeously, intentionally crafted, rich in visual interest. Many three-dimensional hanging works inhabit a halfway-house of artistic intention — not quite seeming like paintings, not looking like sculpture either. These works feel organic — like they could not be anything else but what they are.

The search for meaning, though not directly offered, is still irresistible. The temporary quality of the structures in some of the Migrant series can be quickly recognized: summer homes, cottages on stilts, unmoored boats, abandoned jetties to nowhere. An unfocused feeling to the images also creates a mood.

The stitched gauze casts shadows on the back surface — shadows that become another medium, like the woodcut print, or the paper, or the stitching. Intentionally marking the surface, the shadows etch their way into the visual plane, obscuring the background, but also adding to its texture.

The nocturnal quality — just hinted at — coupled with the lack of human presence, and the dark inked hues of the woodcuts, is either peaceful or unsettling, depending solely on the viewer.

Shepley teaches as an adjunct at Montserrat, works in Somerville's Brickbottom Building, and is represented by the Boston Sculptors Gallery. Her earlier works — some have been seen locally at the Rocky Neck Cultural Center, in a previous Montserrat group show, and at the Decordova, as well as many Boston and area galleries — embrace sculpture, drawing, prints, and mobiles, some overlapping.

The Schlosberg Gallery — really just a hallway — can be a terrific venue to take in a small show. Especially like this, when a small show has a lot to say.

“Julia Shepley: Sequential Prints” runs through Aug. 3 at Montserrat College of Art’s Schlosberg Gallery. Visit www.montserrat.edu or call 978-867-9604.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR’s ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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