

FEATURED

A cut above

By Bart Charlow
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Bart on Art

by Bart A. Charlow

More Information

M Stark Gallery, 727 Main St.,
Half Moon Bay, (415) 407-8743,
mstarkgallery.com

Or above and below the linocut, is how I would characterize Margaret Niven's upcoming exhibit at M Stark Gallery, Sept. 1 to Nov. 11. Niven's artwork, while having classical themes, is anything but staid.

Much of the work in this show is multimedia: linocut prints and oils, or oil and collage. Some are pure prints but large, even a couple of triptychs, which is unusual in that art form.

"I'm really a painter who prints," Niven says.

Her work process is so varied and complex that sometimes she's deconstructing pieces to form new ones.

"I think I must have a disorder," says Niven, "that I have to challenge myself in the details."

To my eye, there are clearly homages to Monet and even David Hockney, two influences she credits.

For example, three of the pieces are ponds of water lilies with trees or background reflected in the water. Monet with a modern twist.

"Until Then" has the pond with reflections of the sky and leading the eye back to what might be the tree-lined shore. "Perennial Debut 1" focuses in on the lily pads with no real horizon line, while "Perennial Debut 2" drills straight down to the pads and flowers.

Toward the end of his life, Monet's work became almost abstract with freer brush strokes. Flowers appear as swirls of thick paint, rather than highly detailed botanical studies. You have to stand back to have them resolve into recognizable objects, and given the sheer size of his later works, standing back is part of the exercise anyway.

Niven, by contrast, takes you right in closer to those flowers. Four appear as smeared jelly on toast. “Ruby Roses for Cy,” “Pink Roses for Cy,” “Red Roses for Cy,” and then “Julia’s Roses” are a set of these. Lucky Cy and Julia. Very Monet, only you’re intended to have your nose up to the canvas this time. That’s Cy Twombly, whose art inspired this series, by the way.

Then there are her mixed-media forest scenes. “Moss Beach Cypress” is an oil and collage work depicting the cypress tunnel at Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, leading the eye to the fence and coastline beyond. It’s a very familiar view to locals, that repeats in other media.

Oil, linocut and collage reappear in “Despues de la Lluvia,” a more abstract painting that seems to be a forest below, mountains in middle distance, and sky beyond, all in a crinkled texture that suggests the rain.

“After the Rain” and “Summer Shade” likewise portray the forest in different conditions in a more representational style — Hockney-esque.

Here’s where the pure linocuts take off. “Sanctuary” is a linocut and ink triptych of a cypress forest tunnel. Partnering with that are two linocut reductions of the forest, “Cypress Sanctuary AP1” and “Cypress Sanctuary AP2,” all three of which depict that natural feature at Fitzgerald Marine Reserve in Moss Beach.

Oh, and in case you get tired of those classic subjects, she takes a sharp detour to depict a run of sardines in appropriately named “Sardi.” A school of the blue fish cluster in their dash down the California coast, which you cannot miss, since half the painting is a map of the coastline. A tip of the hat to the kind of action painting over marine maps that Leroy Neiman pioneered 60 years ago, only his was about sport, and Niven’s is about nature.

Niven wants you to feel “joyful.” “Appreciate the natural environment that we’re preserving here, and think of helping to take care of it.”

Toward that goal, during this exhibition, M Stark Gallery will offer a signed photogravure print on paper by Niven: “Cypress Grove,” 11x10 inches, for \$20; proceeds from the prints purchased in the gallery will benefit Friends of Fitzgerald Marine Reserve.

Artist reception Sept. 13, 1-4 p.m. Fourth Friday artist talk Sept. 25 at 5 p.m.

M Stark Gallery, 727 Main St., Half Moon Bay, (415) 407-8743, mstarkgallery.com.

Bart Charlow, author, artist and consultant, blends more than 50 years of painting and photography with narrative storytelling. Explore the intersection of observation and expression through his insights on the local art scene, find his books at bartcharlow.com and his art at bartsart.weebly.com.

