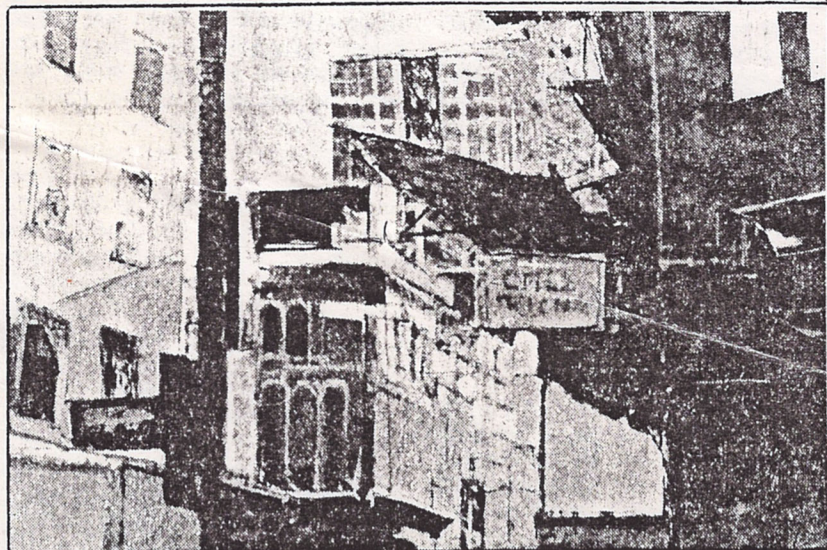


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'The North End,' a collage by Flora Natapoff.

An act of seeing

FLORA NATAPOFF, collages and paintings on paper and canvas. Brockton Art Museum, through July 25

By Robert Taylor
Globe Staff

The mixed media pictures of Flora Natapoff express the gestures of cityscapes — the skewed turbulence of traffic, the stagnant mote-filled sunlight of air-shafts, the off-center tilt of girders — through a personal and evocative idiom.

In common with others who describe and interpret the contemporary urban landscape, she presents an anonymous environment. People as individuals do not appear in her scenes, nor do the specifics of social activity, but the human presence all the same is never far away.

It is instructive to compare her vision of the city with, say, that of the well-known super-realist, Richard Estes. Cities in his work become images of emptiness, places where reflections are multiplied by the knife-edged facades of glass-sheathed towers, architecture possesses an oppressive clarity and the streets are numbed by a perpetual Sunday afternoon stillness. The energies of the city in a Natapoff collaged painting are implied. Instead of architectural detail, she is interested in line and color, the contours of objects, smooth and granular contrasts, the layered textures of metal and stone. Her cities, one feels, are like the cities of Saul Bellow or of Louis Malle's movie, "Atlantic City," perpetually rising and falling, ripped apart, eviscerated, rebuilt, constantly in flux. Estes' cities are mirrors gazing blankly at the spectator; Natapoff presents the involvement of being in the city, among a vital multiplicity of forms.

Her pictures are also about the act of seeing. Using cut-out and torn papyry shapes attached to a canvas base, like the applied cut-outs of the abstract expressionist, Conrad Marca-Relli, she achieves through this technique figurative results similar to his abstract paintings. The edges of the collaged shapes both demarcate and blur the separate forms. Because of the interesting points of view, the dimensions and spatial placement of detail is not always predictable. We might be looking down from a tall building, the eye borne across a

succession of facades in a series of roller-coaster swoops; or peering up at the grids of a skylight where light filters through dusty angular symmetries; or rumbling along an urban panorama on a subway train, and catching glimpses of shapes opening out, becoming abbreviated, lights and darks streaming away here, looming with startling accents there, a phantom drain-pipe hanging parallel to a building, a flutter of pigeons flung against a coppery sky.

Natapoff's pictures, for all the complexity of their parts, are organized on an ample scale with a formal, attractive authority. The treatment of ragged-edged, torn elements corresponds to the subject of buildings gutted by the wrecker, undergoing architectural transformation, sliced into cross-sections. In certain respects the subject is color too, the glistening chrome blacks and purples of traffic on a dynamic diagonal course, the masses of orange and khaki smoldering among the deep shadowy recesses of a warehouse. A palpable density of surface never becomes clotted or confused.

Choosing her materials scrupulously, Natapoff seeks out archival papers for contrast, heightening figure and ground relations and the like. The archival papers (these are, in fact, highly durable, though capable of suggesting the fragile and tenuous) offer engaging textural juxtapositions and disclose an enormous variety and nuance of surfaces close to and far away. The works throughout reveal the sheer visual excitement lying in the textural rhythms of everyday urban landscape — these disquieting, eroded, peeling, chaotic perspectives of the city, so rife with nonrepresentational hints, yet containing so much calm identity, too.

Six Boston photographers associated with the circle of Minor White are also on display at Brockton this month. They are David Wunsch, Albert R. Frederick Jr., Eric Myrvaagnes, Rosemary Porter, Nicholas M. Stephens and Barbara M. Marshall. They comprise an impressive group, though differing in temperament, and I was especially impressed by Myrvaagnes' moody landscape, the rhythms of Marshall's architectural themes and the hard-edged minimalism of Wunsch.

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