

Flora Natapoff: Construction/Sight

by Rebecca M. K. Nemser

Propelled by images from city life, Flora Natapoff grapples with the paradox of marks on paper taking form, reconstructing the visible world. In her work every mark is consubstantial, both description and abstraction. What matters is the quality of transformation. Through the process of keeping faith with found images of memory and desire, abstraction emerges as transcendence.

Natapoff began to exhibit when she was in her mid-thirties, emerging from a long period of silent, private painting with a group of large, dense, passionate drawings and collages from paintings by Brueghel. A painter since childhood, she used to stop in at the Museum of Modern Art on her way home from New York's High School of Music and Art to admire Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Under the spell of the action painting of Pollock and De Kooning, she became an Abstract Expressionist for a few years. In Cambridge during the sixties she began to paint from what she wanted to look at: still-life constructions, interiors, then the Brueghels, which she had seen in Vienna a decade before. She invented a way of drawing with painted paper to work against her own virtuosity and slow herself down, extending by collage the act of painting.

Brueghel's paintings seemed to her to embrace every aspect of life and art in levels of meaning reaching from historical and psychological observation through religious inspiration, landscape painting, brilliant imaginative leaps, and a purely abstract pictorial power. The forms of lights and darks, the piercing of the tower mass, and the strange, inevitable shapes and lines work as abstract massings of paint on the picture plane. The Tower of Babel especially had for her a powerful symbolic reality. Its looming, luminous presence had infinite ramifications. Natapoff's explorations of the tower revealed numberless, measureless caves opening onto other hidden worlds, like the map of a world mapped on a mind. Of these pictures from Brueghel she says, "This was my only serious apprenticeship."

In 1971 she was able to paint full time on a Radcliffe Institute fellowship. Walking every day to her studio she passed the construction site for what is now Harvard University's Science Center. The hole in the ground, the many levels, the shadows cast by the grids of machines struck her as a vision of a terrible beauty wrought out of destruction and loss.

In the site she saw projected onto the visible, daily world the same structural power and sense of heightened reality she had seen in the tower. Each of Babel's darkening archways became a doorway she could actually go through.

"When I hear the word 'beauty,' I like to hear the words 'hard won' as well." She began to search for images that contained the configurations of forms that spoke to and haunted her. During the next few years she made invigorated, stripped-down works in black and white from the construction site and other broken, scattered industrial landscapes. She hammered a fierce formal order from desolation, flecked through at times with a difficult, dissonant beauty. These harsh excavations gave way gradually to other lessons from the tower. She has embraced increasingly complex situations with a greater, more painterly reach of color. Digging deeper into images of the real, reimagined cities she inhabits, Natapoff began to work swift, impressionistic brush strokes and pastel marks into the larger shapes of torn paper and to multiply the layers of paper and marks on the surface of her work.

She remembers everything she sees. Every move is a leap, the consolidation of her experience. A series of paintings and collages of Harvard Square at dusk is dominated by a V-shaped sky of interwoven blues, which cuts into the huge darkness of a Piranesian city gashed by intermittent light. A collage of the Lechmere bus station is at once open and divided down the middle by light and architecture, like a Giotto annunciation. A group of landscapes of hills and abandoned mines seen on a holiday in Wales is a lyrical adagio of softened color and purified formal relationships.

Her latest paintings, a series of visionary cities, are her most Venetian. They show a universe in flux, taking form only at moments won through the discipline of work and observation. Dense, rich purples, blues, yellows, amaranthine stalk the cruel, mysterious beauty of cities in layer upon layer of recomplication and reconciliation.

Natapoff works constantly, rising early to spend long, solitary days in her studio on Vernon Street in Somerville. It is a long room filled with stacks of photographs, drawings, paintings on paper, and tables piled with the painted papers she uses in collage. These are made by painting with a roller on long strips of white paper; she gets the shapes she wants by ripping, cutting, or by scoring with a pushpin and tearing along the perforations. "I love to work," she says. "I love the life, the order, the acts involved. That's what I want to do."

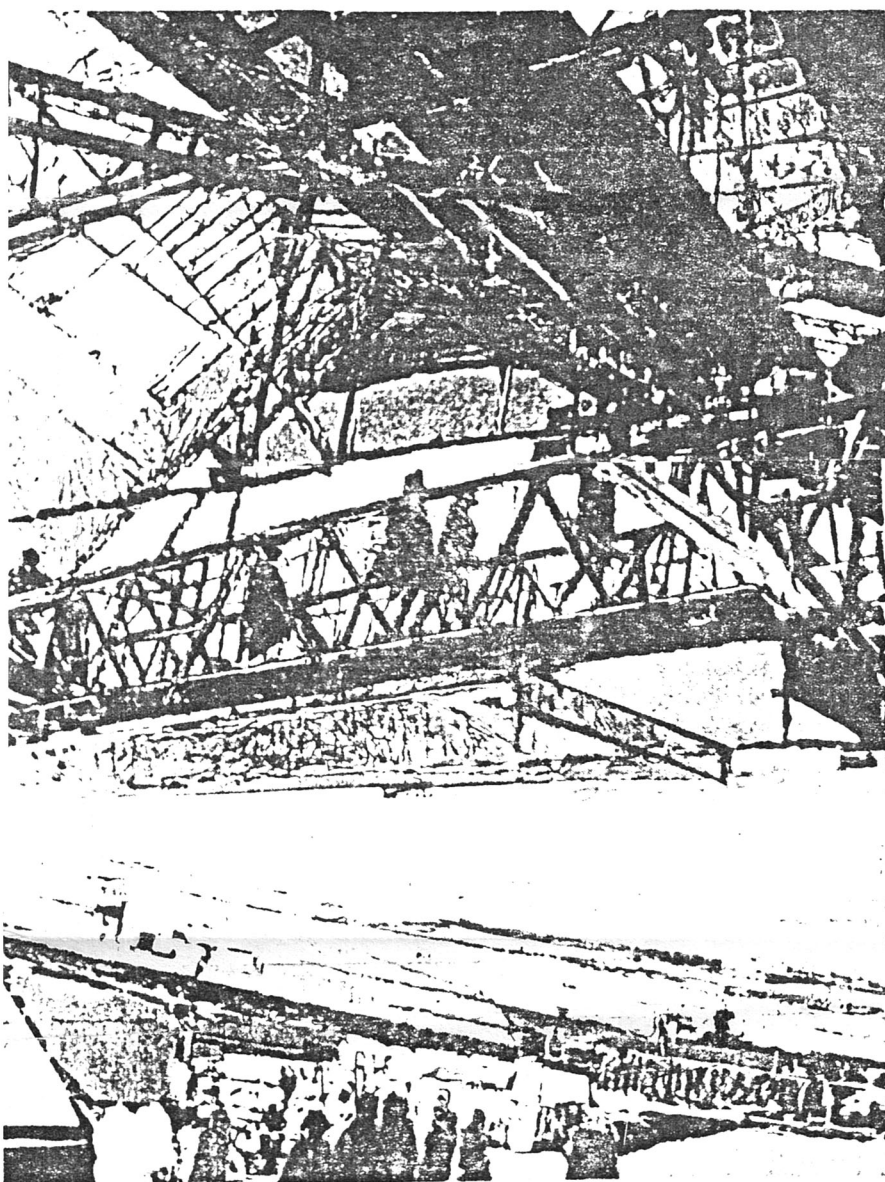
She works in two modes: drawings and small paintings, which happen all at once, and the huge collages that sometimes take months or years — "sometimes forever." A new series begins with a new subject, caught at first in glimpses, intimations: traffic rushing under a subway bridge, an elegant pile of ruined cars, a shape of sky, a time of day. She photographs everything that seems to speak to her. These snapshots are the first manifestations of a life of constant observation: "I have it in my mind and I like to have it in my hand."

They are intense, immediate recognitions of a real city she has imagined: she has its number and its key. Through the process of painting and drawing she discovers what lies behind these images, abandoning the snapshot as the immanent formal laws governing the subject emerge. "The photograph works as the catalyst of a situation . . . The image is not a pretext except in the worst work." She begins the big collages by painting; then a first piece of paper firms everything up. "I am addicted to that moment." The work becomes more abstract as the image falls away.

Abstraction is realization. Born from the mass of marks on paper and canvas are ordering principles, signs and portents of a structure revealed through the repetition and reiteration of certain forms. Circles, often of light, and rectangles, usually dark, are never exact geometrical figures. Geometry, like

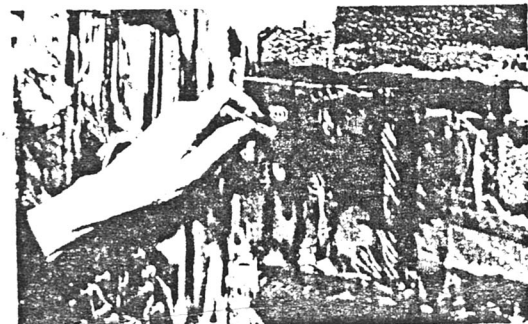
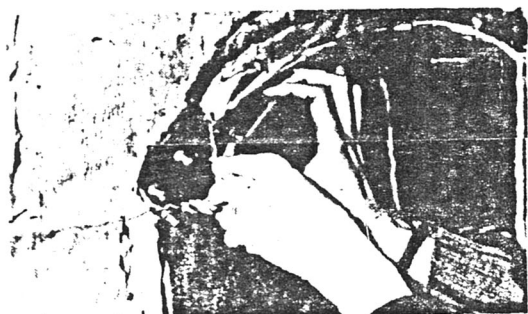
New England

Volume II Number 9 October 1981



Above:
Calwalk, collage, 6' x 7', 1976

Right:
Two Photographs of Flora Natapoff's hands from *The Artist and the Built Environment* by Donald Stoltenberg.



beauty, has to be hard won. They are closely observed, eccentric shapes, ineluctable modalities of the visible. The realized structure holds everything in place, capturing on a single plane the vertiginous movement of the parts. In the finding, losing, and finding again, each of a measureless number of pieces is just in the right place.

Natapoff works fast and furiously, making hundreds of changes in a single session. We can trace the archaeology of her work on the surface. Its twists and turns keep visible the record of those changes. As in the paintings of Cezanne, the passionate accumulation of marks gives the work a tremulous condensation. The surface of a Natapoff painting is a place where battles have been fought, cities and temples built up and brought down, and on which there has been a wrestling with angels.

She paints standing up, in a warrior's dance with the paper and canvas. Her physical gestures—her stance and the swing of her arm—recall Pollock's; but here the gestures serve the images that haunt and drive her. For Natapoff the means of expression are abstract—marks on paper and scraps of paper that must always hold their own. But the energy to work comes from looking at something that moves her. "I feel a need to objectify my feelings in images . . . Why should I give anything up?"

Rebecca Nemser is an artist and frequent contributor to *Art New England*.