

REVIEW: FLORA NATAPOFF

"...shows us one artist's personal vision that makes us see our surroundings with new eyes."

Flora Natapoff, whose recent work can be seen at Marcus Krakow Gallery through December 2, works in paint, pastel, and torn paper on canvas, with paint applied over paper and paper glued over paint until the original surface is almost completely obscured. Her imagery is the architectural environment. Earlier works were of factory interiors and construction sites, and these are of the space of a city street, hemmed in by buildings and cars.

She is drawn to forms that reveal their skeletal structure — scaffolding of bridges, elevated trains, or the maze of traffic signs. While legibly descriptive of their sources, these works could at first be taken as completely non-objective, so overriding is the concern with abstraction, so dominant the subjective handling of the media. They are about how the structure and clutter of the city translates into painted form that stands on its own as visual abstraction.

While technically collages, the works are paintings in spirit. The torn paper is incorporated into the surface, not juxtaposed as a found object, and serves as another way of applying paint. (The papers are pre-painted with a roller and then torn, so that a painted shape can be put down all at once, as with a single sweep of a brush.) The use of brushmarks as filler in a pre-defined form is eliminated — as in Matisse's cut-outs, the directionally neutral surface of the colored paper doesn't interfere with the thrust of the torn paper form. The visual vocabulary becomes clear — brushstrokes maintain their visual identity, showing direction and gesture, or scumbling color to mix optically with the color underneath.



The new paintings differ from earlier ones in their depiction of more solid forms. Earlier works tended to show more space between more linear form — the sky glimpsed between girder, or the vast space of a factory crisscrossed with beams and catwalks. A problem with the new paintings is that the massive forms and built-up surface of paint and paper, unrelieved by light filtering between the shapes, grow murky in places.

Also, Natapoff's new interest in showing the overall color of a certain time of day — often early evening — sometimes results in large areas that, even though made of active brushmarks and collage, read as a single tone rather than a quality of light. (Earlier works relied more on value contrast than color.)

Some of the small oil paintings on paper carry the idea of an overall light more successfully. Here, where

Glasgow Station by Flora Natapoff.
48" x 72". Acrylic and collage.

the small scale allows each mark to make a major statement, the structure tightens up, and the pinkish skies, dark jumble of buildings, and glowing spots of colored lights coalesce into a convincing atmosphere.

Perhaps the best painting in the show is *Glasgow Station*. It is full of contrasts — airy interior light and shadowed traffic, the spidery structure of arched windowframes and heavy building exteriors. We barely see the ground plane because a building, slightly tilted and viewed from the street it is built over, looms over the lower third of the canvas where traffic activity is evocatively suggested by clusters of rectangular forms, punched through to open space beyond. Building and street, front and back, surface and deep space, dark and light, are all tied together by the consistent reading of the odd viewing angle and the repeating vertical elements of columns, windowframes, and traffic signs.

Natapoff's works manage to preserve the searching mark, the gesture of the hand, and the energy of a rough sketch while being deliberate and resolved. The use of collage allows her to work back and forth, adding and obliterating, while still keeping the surface fresh. The impression is of intensity and speed of execution in a painting that may have taken months to complete.

Natapoff combines acute observation with an overriding interest in abstraction and the act of painting itself. Like Piranesi's prisons, like Moore's elephant skulls, like Estes' New York streets, Natapoff's work shows us one artist's personal vision that makes us see our surroundings with new eyes.

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— Phyllis Koenig