

Flora Natapoff's collage paintings

When Picasso and Braque around 1910 introduced fragments of the "real" world into their pictures — printed squares of imitation marble, scraps of newspaper, calling cards — these elements had the formal effect of affirming the picture's flatness and the psychological effect of converting the data of "reality" into the illusions of art. Thus the physical presence of the painting became more intense.

Flora Natapoff uses a technique of pasting and manipulating scraps of paper; it is called collage; but her collage approach differs from her illustrious predecessors in the fascinating exhibition of her recent work at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum through Nov. 17. She employs torn paper, combined with acrylics and pastels. And from these materials she creates a space that is not flat, in which the tearing of the paper and its pasting on the surface serves a descriptive purpose, in which the intervals between objects are dramatic, in which content and style complement each other like a matched pair of horses.

The content concerns the environment we inhabit these days as factory and warehouses, relics of the industrial revolution,

give way to skyscrapers and parking lots. It is a landscape of dissolution. Natapoff makes us feel both the brute structure and lyricism of that landscape, and the panoramic sweep of its destinies. Suspended above a maze of cloverleaf expressways and the jagged intervals of underpasses (an aqueduct in the lower left of the picture called "Highway" will serve as an homage to Cezanne until a better one comes along), we scan the image from a bird's-eye perspective, or we gaze ("Locomotive") into a jungle of gears, pistons, rods, which sorts itself into a similar burst of inflections, or we experience ("Shadows") the gothic spaces of crumbling factories mottled by dusty sun.

Torn paper, the fractured surfaces of construction sites and agitated strokes of the pastel crayon: Natapoff fuses the imperial scale often characteristic of industrial architecture with the velocity and briskness of intimate gestural touches. Nevertheless, the pasted elements do have the effect of recalling the eye to the surface of the painting, even though she does not use collage as the Cubists did, to accentuate the shallow space of planes. What she gives us, really, is a choice between traditional illusory space and the flat sur-

face. The artist most directly associated with this dialectic in contemporary art is Willem de Kooning. Natapoff resembles him slightly in the clotted cityscapes de Kooning executed in the mid-fifties, more so in the paintings he made in Rome in 1959-60. These were painted with black enamel on paper. Then he would tear up the sheets and assemble and reassemble them until they became physically weighty, the torn edges and pumice-thickened enamel becoming more and more like bas-relief, a species of sculpture.

Natapoff's collages, however, do not become sculpture: they imply painting. For this she owes a debt of gratitude to her Renaissance Flemish colleague, Pieter Brueghel. The sequence of works based upon themes by Brueghel is in a separate gallery, displayed, appropriately, as the course of the succeeding pictures.

Carl Belz writes that the Brueghel series "forced the artist to be objective, her subject matter, and to translate, as it were, statements written in a foreign language into her native tongue. In doing so, she learned to control the torn paper vocabulary she had begun to experiment with in the late sixties, at the same time adjusting that

vocabulary to the data of an external, visible world."

The Brueghels are of interest precisely for those reasons; in themselves strongly tied to Brueghel's concepts, suggesting the copyist rather than the inventor, they turn out to be sources of creativity. The breakthrough may have come with Natapoff's version of the building of the Tower of Babel, which is different from Brueghel's. Whereas the latter presents a parable of the scene, Natapoff presents the structure itself, filling the picture space with its dense rotundity. Fascination with structure here is only a short distance from the themes of industrial erosion.

Furthermore, if de Kooning was at pains to avoid all imputations of the literary, he wished his art to express also the

commonplace look of life, prosaic house paints, rubbed surface. Natapoff is not afraid of the objective fact, but her paintings are not anecdotal or illustrative. She too catches this elusive marvel of ordinary experience, this roughhewn mystery. A rusty cauldron climbing through space is redeemed from its illusory function by the torn paper pyramid which defines its lower edge; a dialogue of broken pastel marks and ragged edges tilts a skylight, gives it the aspect of springing from nature rather than from an artist's ostentatious plans. Flora Natapoff, in any event, is the kind of painter, relatively little-known but worth knowing, who should be presented by a university museum, and at the Rose Art Museum, Carl Belz's program is away to a felicitous start.



"Red Cauldron," a torn paper, acrylic and pastel painting in the Flora Natapoff exhibition at the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis, through Nov. 17.