

The Urban Visions of Flora Natapoff

By Jane Steinberg

Poetry that expresses for us our latent, inchoate responses to the world grips us strongly. The collages of Flora Natapoff are such poetry. (Her show at Brandeis's Rose Art Museum closes Nov. 17.) Natapoff's subject matter is our enormous impersonal constructions, our riveted-steel landscapes, our new urban ruins. Using torn pieces of paper like brush-strokes or as pictorial units, and layering them with paint and pastels in an active interpenetration of surfaces, she creates big pictures of huge structures, huge spaces. She evokes what we really feel in our relationship to our climateless environment of elevated train tracks, highways, bridges, enormous girder-and-glass buildings.

For people around Boston the poetic shock will be even more reverberant because we know, or think we know, these specific structures: This "South Station Bridge," a great abandoned craft with iron sails, aground forever against a dead sky, is the very thing we encounter at the end of the Mass. Pike extension, not in

its literal dimensions and colors but as that large indecipherable steel process that looms there. Some of the several paintings of "Disintegrating Factories" surely must be of the old P.F. Flier factory in Watertown, observed while its dead buildings still lay around with their glass mostly gone but their exterior shells intact. The drawings of a different "Disintegrating Factory" gave me the same shock I felt in real life when I came upon (as I believe I did) that very building being destroyed at the end of one of those industrial mazes off route 2 in Cambridge. Even the scenes that can't be specifically identified have a generic familiarity, especially those seen from the air.

Natapoff's spaces are all uninhabited. Although there may be somewhere a stairway or a piece of subway train, these only make patterns and give scale. Her spaces are complex, airless, barren, shot through with light patterns and grilled with interruptions of steel, impersonal, too large to be lonely because too large for people (who made them). In many of the interiors

the space has been canted to the right, stretched vertically at the left edge of the picture and compressed on the right, producing a sense of reverse vertigo (dizzy when you look too far in or up — I know someone who used to get dizzy thinking about Mozart) to reinforce the sense of vastness and depth.

The stress of diagonals, a compositional essential in all the later paintings, begins abruptly in one of the five 1971 paintings after Bruegel, most of which depict a space as palpable and intricate as Edam cheese. But suddenly, in "Tower of Babel," the first example of unmistakable Natapoff architecture, an ascending warren of unoccupied habitations whose outer walls have been removed, the center of the space tips slightly to the right and begins to go askew. The spatial manipulation is most vividly apparent in three adjacent pictures that have three different subjects — "Construction Site," "Overpass" and "Factory Interior" — but the same composition.

Another informative instance of pictures positioned to show a

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relationship — for this we have to thank Carl Belz, the Museum's Director, who has placed all of the paintings on the show with a sharp sense of how they work together — is the drawing and the painting of "Trains," both of which can be observed from one vantage point. Their similarities are obvious; it is their differences that really tell us something. Colors, hot colors in this case, combine with the black paper to stretch the space from front to back, adding depth. Shapes are altered only somewhat, slight curves bent straight, then members thickened a bit, a blank passage in the drawing just compressed out of the painting — and the collage trains suddenly leap forward with so much more "reality" than those in the good representational *grisaille*.

Natapoff's pictures are

dramatic, exciting to look at, high visual and imaginative pleasure. Paper is the principal color medium, giving uniform intensity to each unshaded color area and changing only when altered by paint or pastels. Visually chaotic close-to (how does she do it?), at a distance these macro-flakes coalesce into sharply delineated forms of monumental size and substance. Even with Cezannes one does finally stop caring about all those broken planes of color and simply experiences the pictures. And fascinating as their technique is, these Natapoffs do finally allow you to stop peering into them trying to figure out what is paper and what paint. The medium and the technique primarily do just what they are meant to do, which is to make the pictures and make them work. Black rag paper serves throughout as the drawing, solid or shadow — a black so black, so opaque, never harsh. A cream-colored rag paper serving similarly for light completely lacks radiance but effects great clarity, depth and warmth. Although the paper and paints and pastels are interlayered into a richly complicated surface, that surface is strictly in the service of the picture.

This year's paintings of trains, views from the air and more factory interiors have the richest colors and the most complicated designs (two hours later I still had not figured out a piece entitled "Locomotive"). They also seem to be stretching out into the two-dimensional and abstract, but that may be the only way for Natapoff to go after the extraordinary spatial and compositional whorl of her 1973 "Roundhouse." Wherever she is going, her way is her own and very exciting.

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