

Natural deceptions; rejoicing stars

By Cate McQuaid
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In the middle of a rainstorm this past winter, I navigated around a lake-size puddle by clambering over a 3-foot-high pile of snow. I assumed it was solid; it had been pushed there by a snowplow. But with my first step the snow dissolved beneath me like cotton candy, and I found myself hip-deep in slush.

The world of Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz is as deceptive and disturbing as a snowdrift in the rain — although unquestionably more beautiful. The painter, who has a show up at the Howard Yezerski Gallery, deals in illusions and dissolutions. Spending time with her works — lush, detailed paintings on crumbling plaster slabs — can be dizzying, because every time you put a finger on what you're really looking at, it falls out from under you like that pile of snow. At least for me, my feet finally hit blacktop. With Spatz-Rabinowitz, there is no ground zero.

"Bermuda Wall" features a painting of a cool, gray stone wall. Green sprigs sprout from the crevices, and a window looks out on sun-soaked island foliage, described with such delicate, intricate detail, you can almost feel the sea breeze and smell the mangoes.

But wait. The plaster upon which



Reed Kay's 1989 "View from Chestnut Street" in a show of Boston scenes by 15 contemporary realist painters. Seeing the Boston Athenaeum exhibit is a little like poring through a family photo album.

this idyllic scene is painted breaks, splits and cracks. A large, rusty crevice cuts down the middle of the tropical greenery. To the right, the plaster crumbles away to reveal a wire-grid skeleton beneath. The Caribbean reverie is interrupted by the more abstract beauty of the deteriorating surface, which in turn is interrupted by the rusty geometry of the wire under the surface.

The focal point of "Dark Reflections" is also the fecund, languid growth of trees and plants, this time along the shore of a placid lake. Spatz-Rabinowitz paints nature in full bloom, but her message is ultimately mournful and cautionary: The environment is disintegrating and shifting as quickly as her land-

scapes. Here we have not only leaves and reeds, but their reflection on the water's surface, adding another layer of illusion. The slender gray line of a tree trunk winnows out over the water, then transforms from image into medium, extending into a long drip of paint. Toward the bottom of the piece, the lake becomes an abstract forest of drips, its surface seemingly dusty with disintegrating plaster. Then the drips turn into cracks, which in turn grow to large breaks in the surface, showing rough layers of plaster and dirty wire beneath.

For Spatz-Rabinowitz, it seems there's nothing to hold onto — except beauty, and change.

Across the street at the Andrea Marquit Gallery, Susan Schwab has an antidote for any rainy day. "Galaxies and Other Matter," her show of metallic paintings, portrays not the black, infinite depth of the universe but whirling, clustering nebulae, exploding and rejoicing stars, shimmering as brilliantly and fluidly as the sun reflecting on the ocean.

In the past, Schwab has focused on silverpoint drawing — a medium of extraordinarily fine detail. Two older works are here by way of contrast to her wild textural foray into paint — each an homage to Monet. "Poplar No. 18," a 1992 work, is a vertical piece broken into discrete vertical sections — creamy white alternating with slivers and blocks of metallic paint. The center stripe is gold leaf, with shapes shifting like the imprints of fallen leaves on a wet sidewalk. The artist draws a block of fragile silverpoint lines like wood grain across the center, bristling over the white paint and woven beneath the metallic sections.

All that restraint and minimalist stringency had to break free sometime. In her more recent works, Schwab lets loose, working her paint delightedly. In "Aura No. 5," a golden orb spins, filling the canvas with warm, spitting flames. The base is orange and amber, but she teases the gold paint over the surface, squiggling and swirling it like fingerprint. The result is giddy and alive — like a bright spring day after a long and dreary winter.

ELAINE SPATZ-RABINOWITZ
Recent Work

At: Howard Yezerski Gallery, 11
Newbury St., through May 11
GALAXIES AND OTHER MATTER
Recent Metallic Paintings

by Susan Schwab
At: Andrea Marquit Fine Arts, 38
Newbury St., through May 25
THE FUTURE OF THE PAST
15 Contemporary Realists Paint Boston
At: the Boston Athenaeum, 10 1/2 Beacon
St., through May 18

Visiting "The Future of the Past: 15 Contemporary Realists Paint Boston," now at the Boston Athenaeum, is a little like poring through a family photo album. There are bright, familiar images that could only reveal the face of this city, like George Nick's "Arlington Street Church." This piece catches the warmth of midsummer, with brown stones soaking in the sun and deep shadows cast by the wrought-iron fence and the arch over the church door. Reed Kay's "View from Chestnut Street" is a rhythm of lines, sloping roofs, stovepipes, chimneys and attic windows in the muted brick reds and copper greens of a gray day in Boston.

Some paintings are more intimate, and therefore less identifiably Boston. Susan Jane Belton's accomplished, sharp renderings of the Victory Gardens in the Fens — trash cans under new snow, tools leaning against a chainlink fence — are so sweet in their specificity, it's nice to know they're from here. Richard Sheehan's painterly, near-abstracts of highways are rough, shifting planes of light and shadow. "Freeport Street Exit" is a rush of broad, horizontal brushstrokes in buttery yellow tinged with tangerine, running flat up against the deep, blue shadow of a bridge.

Many focus on the forms of industry. Mela Lyman's "Blue Bridge" frames one bridge in the background against the solid arc of the steel beam of another bridge in the foreground, all bathed in shades of blue. Sidney Hurwitz depicts the underside of the old elevated Orange Line in "Tracks," catching us in the shadow of this steel behemoth.

Elisabeth Pearl depicts Downtown Crossing in a shimmery heat of reds and oranges; a pretzel vendor has his back to us, and people rush by, unseeing, as the buildings soar into the pale sky. David Campbell paints an antinuclear rally in front of the State House.

"The Future of the Past" doesn't address the future; realist painters are, after all, occupied with the present. But the past is implicit in this work, as it is in this city. Curator Vivian Spiro has assembled a handsome, varied collection of visions of Boston.