

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

Digital Beginnings

Harper's Books on Newtown Lane in East Hampton Village presents two artists who work with mechanical means as a launching point to something else
Jennifer Landes



An inkjet print on photo paper by Travess Smalley

Mechanical reproduction has been a preoccupation of artists since photography's invention led many commentators to say painting was dead more than a century ago.

Through efforts at abstraction in two and three-dimensional mediums and incorporation of photographic means to create something else entirely, the most inventive of artists showed how resourceful they could be when the stakes were highest. The advent of digital images and the

manipulation of them created another spurt of innovation, which is still playing out, while slackening somewhat in the past few years.

Lately, it appears artists have played and replayed these gambits to the point where it is difficult to find anyone doing much new with the theme. Harper's Books on Newtown Lane in East Hampton Village presents two artists who work with mechanical means as a launching point to something else. Rather than use the image as the end product, Travess Smalley and Margo Wolowiec make it the source for a far more complicated process that then results in the finished work.

If Ms. Wolowiec's finished product were to be analyzed solely for its medium, she might be called a fiber artist. Technically, this would be correct, but there is something much more polished in her finish than the handmade products typically placed in this category.

Her first step is to make collages out of a variety of images she finds on the Internet. Here, she culled tourist snapshots of Disneyland and the Louvre from Internet share sites, cropped them, and mixed them up to form a composition that may allude to the source, but only obliquely. The images from the resulting collages are then dye-transferred to thread that she weaves on a handloom. Because the images transferred to the thread are then cut in with the thread that binds the piece together, the image is distorted, the way it might look on a screen with a broken vertical hold.

Since the images are fragmented to begin with, the viewer is left to make sense of the composition by

searching it for common elements. The works seem at first to have just a slight distortion that can easily be deciphered, yet the more time you spend time with them, the more confounding they can become. Bewilderment gives you a reason to keep coming back. Even when it is obvious that the images are a puzzle not meant to be solved, the brain still engages and approaches the weavings searchingly, expecting some resolution.

While not always uniform, the cloth looks machine-woven, which underlines the effort it took to hand loom it. At a time when most processes take place with the press of a button or key, Ms. Wolowiec's works demonstrate how the hand can still be engaged in a piece, even when it is born from a machine. Without her own hard work and tactile involvement in the process, this end product could not exist in this form.

For this series she also created a number of plates, that have images taken from the leftovers of the transfer process. While the weavings have a richer heritage that can trace its ancestry to tapestry, the plates and the much clearer subject matter touch on the kitschiness of the souvenir shop and the Franklin Mint. It's a risky gambit, mixing high and low so freely. At a certain point, the exercise can veer off into irrelevancy and confusion. The works do intrigue and engage, but there isn't a lot left in the end to savor.

Mr. Smalley does something similar in an entirely different vein. He uses digital processes as the source or inspiration for his images as well, but works with graphic abstractions, not photographs, as well as compositions of his own making. Instead of creating an end product by hand, however, his process engages him in a different way. He takes these initial designs and reproduces them hundreds of times. His aim is for the process to distort them as he scans, prints, copies, and stores them. Then he may leave them be or hand paint them directly on top of the image or on transparencies he places over the resulting prints.

He may use photo paper, laser paper, color card stock, or simple copier paper as his supports, but he always maintains the American standard letter size of 8 1/2 by 11 inches, at least here. This makes his installation look like a single piece in its uniformity, even as each composition tends to vary greatly. On one piece, there might be simple black and white patterns that are pure hard-edged geometry. On another he might paint floridly colorful expressionism. In a few compositions that contain recognizable subjects, he seems to prefer loosely sketched plant forms.

As much as Ms. Wolowiec's eye-catching imagery and element of craft in her artwork is winning, in the end it is Mr. Smalley who has more staying power. As banal and simple as his works can sometimes appear, seeing them as a whole demonstrates inventiveness and formal dexterity. Whatever his conceptual aims, they lead to compositions that entice viewers, not by being coy, but in their directness. The way he layers composition or arrives at his distortions is often captivating and always agreeable. The Harper's installation includes many of them, but the viewer is left wanting even more.

The exhibition will remain on view through July 7.



Margo Wolowiec's untitled plate made from a dye sublimation process and ink.



Travess Smalley's untitled work incorporates color photocopy on transparency and card stock.