

Shawn Hill, "Nature's Ordeal," Bay Windows, November 17, 1994

Small and Wet, at Bernard Toale Gallery, through Nov. 26

How forthcoming should works of art be, and how reticent in order to retain a sense of mystery? These two shows of resolutely (post) modern art don't give away their secrets easily. The one at Bernard Toal (11 Newbury St., Boston) unites five women artists who seem to share a somewhat minimalist aesthetic; the other at the School of the Museum of Fine arts in the Grossman Gallery, 230 The Fenway, Boston) pairs a young woman with an older man in an uncomfortable (though not unwarranted) juxtaposition.

The painters in "Small and Wet" are so similar that small differences emerge more readily. Louise Fishman is the old master here. Her sturdy, gestural works come directly out of Abstract Expressionism. Landscape is the real common thread to this show. Without being specific, the calm earth tones in "Samahdi" allude to desert life (and the composition to Hans Hoffman), while "Slippery Stone" seems to be about the effects of water and weather. Two large canvases by Katherine Bradford also make distinctions between land and liquid. Using her characteristic layering of polka dots (they resemble Larry Poons' little pellets of color, here swollen up like balloons), in one she alludes to a forest with worm spots of brown against an acid green. In the second, shimmering shapes of blue and gold suggest a more watery world.

Lucy White literally includes nature in her geometric paintings by embedding such items as leaves and segmented worms into the paint. Flat areas of pure color (green, orange, red) fit like puzzle pieces into other sections of gritty texture. There's something of the conflict between city and country in these works, but the rigidity of the technique ultimately dominates any message. Heide Fasnacht's imposing wall hangings of cut rubber recall maps and topography, while **Drew Shiflett's accretions of wood, scrap metal and glue suggest handmade nests for birds or insects. One has to search for the organic in this very controlled art, much as one has to search for a spot of green in a city of concrete and glass. The final result, in a show initially viewed as elegant and sparse, is a feeling of unease, of existential problems posed and left unresolved.**

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