

**Phoebe Mitchell, "Hampden Gallery Abstracts Invite Viewers Within," Hampshire Gazette, May 1, 2003**

### **HAMPDEN GALLERY ABSTRACTS INVITE VIEWERS WITHIN**

Tuesday, April 22, 2003 – AMHERST – The term abstract expressionism brings to mind the exuberantly gestural paintings of Jackson Pollock, whose ground-breaking "drip-and-splash" style captures the action of creating a canvas.

The abstract paintings on view at Hampden Gallery at the University of Massachusetts through May 26 exist at the other end of the spectrum, drawing their power from subtler visual stimuli. They reveal thought more than action.

The show, called "Liminal" – a name derived from the word "subliminal" – features the work of 10 young abstract artists making waves today in the New York City art scene, as well as a look at how abstract expressionism has evolved.

While there are significant differences, the art these newcomers make has more in common with the abstract expressionism of the '40's and '50s than first meets the eye. In particular, both approaches are rooted in the in-the-moment immediacy of making art.

A visit to the gallery proved that point. There, as guest curator David Gibson of New York City and gallery workers were nearly through hanging the 11 pieces in the show, two of them were still unfinished, a few hours before the 5 p.m. exhibit opening.

In fact, artists Janice Caswell and Sonita Singwi were on hand, after traveling to the Umass campus from New York, to help install their wall-mounted works. The pieces came with blueprints, said Gibson, but still required on-site assembly by the artists.

Singwi's piece looks like someone scooped small multi-colored globs of paint from a painter's palette and threw them at a smooth, white canvas. Each dab of paint is a blend of glistening colors that look fresh from the tube. To complete the piece, Singwi installed vividly colored bits of confetti-like tape on the wall to one side of the canvas. The painting has a free-wheeling quality, as if the paint (or the painter?) is too exuberant to be contained in a square of canvas.

Installed directly on the wall, Caswell's piece looks like a large map made of pencil lines with colored dots. The pencil lines loop and twirl like a highway interchange gone awry, with dots clustered here and there, as if marking the spots of crucial events or places. Five hours before the opening, Caswell still had dots to add to the piece. She entices the viewer to follow her line through its maze of colored dots, inventing along the way a storyline that fits that journey.

While the spontaneity of these pieces – and others on view at Hampden Gallery – links them to the abstract art created half a century ago, they also are good examples of the lyrical introspection that today's artists bring to their work. "Liminal" artists coax viewers to ponder their sensual, intellectual and emotional sources.

The works include those by Erwin Redl, who is known for his elaborate light and sound installations and **Drew Shiflett, who creates a vision of a utopian future in her paper and wood collages.** Other artists are Laura Lobdell, Peggy Bates, Miriam Cabessa, Carter Hodgkin, Lisa Stefanelli and Anna Pedersen.

The artists have been featured in major exhibitions at the Bronx Museum, the Whitney Museum in New York, as well as exhibits in other countries. The range of creative approaches is striking.

Stefanelli, who spent her early years training for national competition as a figure skater, creates swirling arabesques of color that bring to mind the tracings of blades on ice. But her sinuous forms extend beyond immediate experience, evoking designs in the Book of Kells or Art Nouveau's lavish decorative style. Her paintings, said Gibson, "inscribe the space without filling it up."

Bates' poured acrylic painting suggests bodies of water or ice floes. Smooth pools of turquoise and other shades of blue paint cover the canvas in swirling patterns that suggest maps of oceans and sea currents.

Redl's large rectangular work is covered with a grid of silver-dollar-sized silver droplets. They resemble raindrops frozen in the act of hitting the pavement. The grid, Redl explains in a statement about his work, is a nod to the digital age, where computer codes combine binary logic and formal structure with controlled randomness.

According to Gibson, "the idea for the show is to present a variety of abstract works in which the most subtle visual element is at work, allowing for the viewer to indulge in psychological reflection instead of being overwhelmed by gestural gymnastics." "I like to do shows that make people think about looking," said Gibson.

**Phoebe Mitchell**