

PREVIEW

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ARTIST SEES LINEAGE OF WORKING WOMEN
IN NEWEST CREATIONS./6

VISUAL ARTS

ARTIST OCCHIOGROSSO HA

Family heritage of textile work has found way into her artwork

By Joseph Dalton

In the recent works of the Troy-based painter Gina Occhiogrosso, vibrant colors and floating shapes suggest a natural link to the abstract expressionist movement of the last century. Yet there was a distinct machismo in that school of painters and Occhiogrosso approaches her art from a feminist perspective. She doesn't hide or bury that frame of mind, it's right there on the surface. In fact, it is the surface.

Occhiogrosso paints on bleached muslin, the light cotton fabric commonly used in making sewing patterns, nappies and summer weight dresses. "It feels authentic to me," she says, with the awareness that she comes from a lineage of women who sewed.

"I start with muslin, a not precious material, and I use acrylics to create atmospheres and images. Then I put it on the floor and rip it apart. I'll move on to another area and cut it and sew it, making new images. It can be fierce or abrupt and I feel heroic doing that," she says.

"Back and Forth" is a recent work that's included in "Never Done: 100 Years of Women in Politics and Beyond," a virtual exhibit from The Tang Teaching Museum featuring art by 100 women and honoring the centennial of the 19th amendment. In her contribution, Occhiogrosso uses neon colors and, in a departure from her normal practice, she allows some of the seams and trimmed edges of the muslin to be seen, as if one is viewing the underside of a hand-pieced quilt.

Besides the Tang show, which remains on view at tang.skidmore.edu through June 6, other recent exhibits featuring her work are the Hudson Mohawk Regional at the Albany Institute in the fall and "Cut and Color," a group exhibit last year at the Albany airport. She is represented by galleries in Westchester, New York and Westport, Connecticut, and by Zinc Contemporary in Seattle, which honored her with a solo show in November.

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Photos by Joseph Dalton

Works line a wall at the Troy studio of artist Gina Occhiogrosso.

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Growing up in Niskayuna, Occhiogrosso recalls that creativity was part of the family ethos. "We didn't have a lot of money, so we always made things as gifts and also fixed things. That's how I learned to work with my hands," she says.

An essential tool in the household was the sewing machine. She recalls: "My mother had a pedal machine with a cast iron base that you pump. It was a tricky machine, difficult to thread, and the bobbin looks like a torpedo."

That behemoth was given away years ago. Wanting something portable, Occhiogrosso replaced it with another vintage device, a teal Singer Feather-

weight, a collectible that she picked up at a rummage sale. She's held on to that one, but for her current projects something more up to date and commanding was needed. "Two years ago I bought a fancy



Sewing machines are among the art-making tools in Gina Occhiogrosso's Troy studio.

Viking. It's from a company that also makes chainsaws," she says with a grin.

A decade or so back, Occhiogrosso hadn't yet taken to integrating sewing with painting. But the female tradition of needle work still played a role, inspiring a series of works on paper that have the same intricate detail and repetition as lace or cross stitch.

"My mother's mother did beautiful intricate lace work and we have numerous table cloths," says Occhiogrosso. In order to capture the patterns of lace, she would lay a doily on an opaque projector and



Artist Gina Occhiogrosso

AS IT ALL SEWN UP

trace the forms. Then, in place of threads she used another tiny element — words.

As an example, in one piece she printed with a pen the phrase “Try It” hundreds of times, line after line. Changes in ink colors replicate the pattern and images of a cross-stitch sampler. While deep into such fine detail, she thought of women of the past who might be occupied with needlework all day long. “What did they think about as they did this repetitious work?” she wondered.

Occhiogrosso has been on the arts faculty at the College of Saint Rose since 2006. Alas, hers is one of the many teaching posts being eliminated at the end of the year in budget cuts effecting six departments. Her studio in Brubacher Hall bursts with color from the orbs and wheels, tendrils and grids on the numerous works that are completed or in progress.

“I’ve been thinking about scale lately,” she says, “and how fortunate I’ve been to have a spacious studio at the school. Now I’m thinking about where to put all the paintings.”

Many of those paintings stand five or six feet high. She points out the ones that include embroidery and says, “The boundaries of painting have expanded.”

Prior to being hired by Saint Rose, Occhiogrosso was gallery director for the Arts Center of the Capital Region. Her six-year tenure there began when the building was new. Besides organizing shows for the expansive main gallery, she led the way in finding more spaces in the building to show art. That made her job more complicated but also opened up more opportunities for artists. “I have a habit of blowing things up,” she says.

The position at the Arts Center grew to encompass curating and made her a focal point of the regional arts scene. She tells her students, “Learn how to be in community and stay connected. You can’t be an artist by yourself.”

Her friendship with Oatman is evidence of that wisdom. He says, “We have had an ongoing dialogue for almost 25 years. She has been a wonderful friend, committed teacher, innovative gallerist and a very bright light in our northeast constellation of painters.”



Gina Occhiogrosso, Untitled, acrylic ink, spray paint, and embroidery floss on pieced and sewn muslin, 34.75 x 28 inches.

► *Joseph Dalton is a freelance writer based in Troy.*

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