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Skin and Earth, Suddenly Unrecognizable

‘Terra Incognita,’ on Exhibition at the College of New Rochelle

By TAMMY LA GORCE MARCH 1, 2013

Despite the name, “Terra Incognita,” a new exhibition at Castle Gallery at the College of New Rochelle, is not a show that limits itself to depicting unknown lands.

Take the paintings of Gwen Hardie, one of nine artists with works on display. In a sense, her work is intensely familiar. The three round oil paintings — part of a larger series, called “Boundaries,” that the Manhattan artist has been working on since 2008 — portray human skin, in hues of terra cotta, rose, brown and turquoise. And while magnification has the effect of obscuring the subject so it is no longer recognizable, what the paintings ultimately reveal is something known intimately to everyone.

What connects all the works in “Terra Incognita,” which include sculpture, drawings, paintings and a mixed-media piece by the artist Seth Fairweather, of Coral Gables, Fla., is that “what you’re seeing are these strange places that have familiar elements,” said Katrina Rhein, the gallery director

and organizer of the show.

“The familiar is either so closely cropped or presented in such a unique way that it becomes unfamiliar,” Ms. Rhein said.

For Ms. Hardie, whose studio is in Brooklyn, the theme fit, and she felt particular kinship with the sculptures of Laura Moriarty, an artist in Rosendale, N.Y., whose colorful encaustics — sculptures made of pigmented beeswax — have a geological feel.

In Ms. Hardie’s work, skin is the vehicle for a study of surfaces. Ms. Moriarty “also seems to be exploring surfaces, but what she’s looking at is the earth’s surface,” said Ms. Hardie, 50. Two of Ms. Moriarty’s encaustics are on display near a pair of pen-and-ink drawings of mysterious vistas by the artist Benedict Oddi, from Cookville, Tenn.; two of four wall-mounted vignette boxes housing a wreckage of buckling tiles by Will Corwin of Manhattan also are nearby.

The encaustics date from 2009 and are titled “The Expansive Force of Water Freezing in Cracks” and “Subduction Into a Trench.” Scientific-sounding names aside, they are less didactic than curiously pretty: pools of swirling, bleeding color are stacked to form what looks like a 3-D version of the earth’s strata in a textbook diagram crossed with a crumbling or otherwise askew pastry shop confection.

A small room within Castle Gallery called the “feature gallery” is dedicated exclusively to Ms. Moriarty and “Still Time,” an installation she created last year that gathers 50 similar encaustics of various sizes, as well as six paper sculptures hanging from the walls surrounding them.

All of the encaustics represent layer upon layer of a shifting foundation meant to resemble the earth and its precarious movements beneath us.

“I’ve always known ‘terra incognita’ to be about landscape, geology, the

environment,” Ms. Moriarty, 52, said in a phone interview. “That seems general, but it’s also a very specific way of approaching artwork.” Ms. Moriarty said her process involved studying cross sections, often of plate tectonics, in geology books. “Other artists do sketches; I do research,” she said.

Ms. Moriarty builds the sculptures “as a way to get people to think about what’s going on in the earth we’re standing on.”

“I think human beings have this way of thinking about nature and science as something that’s out there happening separate from us,” she said. “And I think that it’s starting to resonate in a more direct way with just regular people — they’re starting to realize that the actions we take have an effect on these processes, the processes of the earth, that are really big and really hard to harness.” The art “becomes a metaphor for being alive, for being vital,” she said.

The might of the environment also informs the work of Gina Occhiogrosso, who traveled from her home in Troy, N.Y., to attend the opening reception in New Rochelle. Her piece “Slump,” a series of 24 gouache-on-paper panels, takes weather-ravaged billboards as its subject.

A few years ago, her work focused on what she called her “broken, disrupted” home. That work indirectly inspired “Slump,” which she made in 2011. “I thought, ‘How can I do some visual representation of the unraveling of the environment, which is similarly unsettled?’ ” said Ms. Occhiogrosso, 47.

She began looking at online images of Federal Emergency Management Agency projects, “and I kept coming across billboards. As I pulled up landscapes, I isolated them,” she said. They are represented in their twisted, dilapidated and broken forms against stark white backgrounds on each panel.

For Ms. Occhiogrosso, the works in the exhibition seemed more about “transcending landscapes” than encountering unknown ones, she said. Regardless of the breadth of “Terra Incognita,” she was glad her work fit in.

So was Ms. Moriarty.

“My work is so weird,” she said. “When you say you make sculptural paintings, who knows what to picture? For commercial galleries it’s a hard sell. So when someone offers me a show like this, it’s an opportunity to do something really ambitious.”

“Terra Incognita” is at Castle Gallery, on the College of New Rochelle campus at 29 Castle Place, New Rochelle, through March 31. Information: (914) 654-5423 or castlegallery.cnr.edu.

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"Subduction into Trench," a geology-inspired encaustic by Laura Moriarty. Courtesy of Laura Moriarty