

## Galleries

# Balance That Spells Beauty

## Nan Montgomery's New Works at Bader

By Michael Welzenbach  
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It may not at the moment be fashionable to make art aimed at achieving beauty, but such a concept still determines directions in the work of Nan Montgomery. Perilously courting the label of "designer artist" by virtue of her simplistic forms, hard edges and delicious colors, Montgomery continues to believe in the purely visual pleasure to be had in finely balanced abstraction. Elegant and minimalist, her works owe much to the abstractions of veteran Washington artists Anne Truitt and Jacob Kainen.

Certainly there are better non-objective artists than she, but her last one-woman show three years ago established Montgomery as a local painter to be reckoned with. In her latest works at the Franz Bader Gallery she takes her colorful compositions into the realm of sculpture: geometrically shaped canvases and assemblages, built out from the wall sometimes to the depth of eight or nine inches. The results of these new explorations are mixed. While there are several really superb pieces that embody the very best elements of her more conventional tableaux, others seem somewhat repetitive and unconvincing, as if, having once hit on the idea of taking liberties with the format—and it's certainly not a new one—the artist did not feel competent to pursue it beyond a rather ornamental point.

On the other hand, Montgomery's pieces have an unusually rich feel, largely due to her choice of medium. While acrylic has largely succeeded oil as the pigment of choice for abstract painters, she has stuck faithfully by oil, delighting in, and making full use of, its innate brilliance, gloss and purity of hue. So as objects, pure and simple, her works have tremendous appeal. Even a simple rectangular canvas



Nan Montgomery's oil-on-wood constructions at the Franz Bader Gallery.

such as "North Light," for example, a harmonic, diagonal composition in cream, yellow, blue and black, achieves new force of presence by being painted on a blocky and substantial armature.

Of her multiple-image works (oil-painted wall assemblages), the best are the simplest. "Yellow Square With Circle and Triangle" is just that—about as simple a combination of forms as you can find. It works, however, because the colors are so precisely coordinated, the internal arrangement of each piece so subtle. But her long panel-like gouache paintings, consisting of divided squares and triangular fields of primary colors, don't convey the same sense of refinement or compositional integrity.

In sum, Montgomery's recent pieces lack the inventiveness and, to a degree, the daring of work by other contemporary nonobjective artists. But it's handsome work in any event, craftily executed and developing slowly toward something truly original.

### Smallwood at Addison/Ripley

Michael Smallwood is another artist for whom the creation of sheer loveliness appears to be almost an end in itself, and for whom compositional balance accounts for a great deal. An exhibit of his recent works, including gouache and acrylics on paper, painted standing screens and monotypes, is currently on view at the Addison/Ripley Gallery. Displayed under carefully subdued lighting, this is one of the most consistently fine collections of work you'll see in town this week.

Large or small, Smallwood's meticulously rendered, uncluttered abstractions reach for an intimate dialogue with the viewer. There's nothing grandiose or pretentious about them; indeed, some of them look as if they began as doodles made with a protractor and T square that ripened over time into full-fledged ideas. Often designed along the format of a small square

within a much larger rectangle, some works have a recessed windowlike appearance; the concentration of brightest values in the smaller square contributes forcibly to this illusion and draws the eye to the deceptively simple geometric forms within.

The most prevalent shape in Smallwood's lexicon—and the one he appears to use the most inventively—is a kind of half-arch, like one side of a church doorway seen in deep shadow. Within this form the artist arranges line-drawn triangles and squares, and pierces the combination with bars of solid color. He is selective in the way he applies his paint, too, frequently mixing acrylic and oil, brushing over a deep blue, say, with pale crimson or salmon pink, coaxing the eye to penetrate the surface. Smallwood even manages to pull off this effect with his small prints.

Of all the works here displayed, the most striking are the standing screens, with which Smallwood joins Tom Nakashima in realizing the particular charm and potential of this format. But easily the most compelling image in the show is a lovely work on paper titled "Alaska," a floating rose square in a field of deep Hooker's green, seemingly incised with a faint pyramid. Altogether a first-class performance.

### Jackson-Jarvis at Kornblatt

"Time Gathers" is the title of the work, but in effect Washington sculptor Martha Jackson-Jarvis's new ceramic composition appears to be flying apart.

At the B.R. Kornblatt Gallery, an entire corner of the large exhibition space is devoted to a floor mosaic and a series of wall pieces spiraling airily about one another, loosely connected by fragments seemingly exploded away from a once carefully crafted pattern.

By now, most dedicated area gallery-goers are probably familiar with Jackson-Jarvis's work: She's been making her free-form abstract

wall pieces and site-specific environmental or architectural compositions (many of which adorn public buildings) for some years now. There's no denying their popularity and appeal, and the Kornblatt installation is one of the more attractive ones. But frankly it would be nice to see her put her considerable talents to work in another direction—focus more on the paper works she has been constructing of late, for example, or see what might come of exploring in depth a medium such as metal, unpainted, or free-standing.

To be fair, around the corner from the Kornblatt Gallery, on D Street in a display window of the Jenifer Building, is another of the artist's installations, titled "Snake Doctor." And this composition incorporates a variety of elements, such as cut-out and perforated copper sheeting in the form of arcane symbols vaguely conjuring feathers, lances, mythical creatures and other talismans. In all, this is the more intriguing piece. The variety of textures and materials, and the way the copper forms, with their frosty-green patinas, dangle from overhead, give it an unexpected charm and visual density. To be sure, this is not the first time Jackson-Jarvis has combined such elements (she had, for instance, a very striking piece of this nature in "The Ritz" group show back in '82), but it would be nice to see more work along these lines.

**Nan Montgomery: Recent Work,** at the Franz Bader Gallery, 1701 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, through Sept. 23.

**Michael Smallwood: Recent Works,** at the Addison/Ripley Gallery, 9 Hillyer Ct. NW, through Oct. 4.

**Martha Jackson-Jarvis: Time Gathers,** at the B.R. Kornblatt Gallery, 406 Seventh St. NW, through Oct. 7.

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