

# Artist Leaves Her Marks in Gallery Show

By Arthur Whitman

On paper, floated on matboard and framed behind glass: loosely-defined blocks and clouds of color; grids, spattered paint, downward drips, fingerprint-like smudges, cursive scribbles, staccato dots, circles in standard sizes (apparently made by tracing objects), fragments of typography.

Such energetic and varied marks form the distinctive lexicon of Melissa Zarem's recent paintings. Done in gouache and crayon—occasionally with graphite—her images allude to landscape, turbulence and writing. The latter association is particularly strong; the incursion of handwriting-like marks into abstract painting is reminiscent of the abstract expressionist Cy Twombly. Her current solo show, "States of Matter," is at the Corners Gallery through June.

"Audrey's Hens" stands upright and is modest in size (about a foot tall). It's the show's most compelling piece. Three stacked rows dominate, a disorderly sequence of irregular leftward-tilting ovals. They're brushy, solidly colored in olive green and/or a slightly translucent greenish-white. Loops and scribbles in red-violet and dark purple-gray also figure in the foreground. These colors find muted echoes in the loosely defined horizontal bands of grayish color fill the background. A bar of red rests along the bottom edge. "Hens" is joyous and suggests the motions of dancing.

Similar in size but roughly square, "Maraschino" is another noteworthy piece. Standing out against an overall background of vertical color-areas—dirtied up salmon pink to the left, olive green to the right—is a varied constellation of color bars. Focused slightly left-of-center, is an assemblage of bars in mostly browns, grays and off-whites.

Their association is abstractly but strongly figurative. I was reminded of the infanta in Diego Velázquez's famous 17th century court painting "Las Meninas." Her cream-colored hoop skirt is here echoed by a wide cream rectangle and an olive-brown crayon loop suggest-



"Audrey's Hens," a gouache and crayon on paper work by Melissa Zarem.

ing its broadest dimension. (These loops and squiggles have a similar effect elsewhere, suggesting depth.)

Zarem is able to make use of strong bright color while avoiding garishness. This is nowhere more clear than with the electric magenta/pink that dominates "Multiply." Down the center cascades a crowd of spongy textured translucent ovals, their "heads" pointed in various directions. To their right (but away from the edge) a brushy vertical band, stiff, the pink opaque, pale and dulled-down. An exuberantly inflected bluish square—cyan scribbles over dull-dark greenish blue tone—dominates the background, framed by bands of medium gray. Tiny traced circles and background ovals of

pale yellow complete the explosive ensemble.

"Scales" is fairly characteristic of the larger, wide-format pieces that anchor "States." Occasionally compelling, it acts like a dictionary of the artist's (admittedly rich) markmaking but lacks the unified statement of the smaller pieces described above. The extensive use of traced-line circles establishes repetition and variation; sometimes they are uniquely filled-in, other times they simply sit atop a background color. Vertical downward drips act like veils. A softly gridded background suggests a landscape seen on an overcast day with its chalky, semi-opaque greens and grays.

Zarem's occasional use of tiny typographic fragments is most pronounced in the small, squarish "Wash." We see a black serifed "A" and a bright pink "@". It would be interesting to see this theme developed further; Paul Klee's synesthetic text paintings are a point of reference. The piece itself is characterized by an ungainliness that is present in most of the work here ("Hens" might be an exception) but that is elsewhere balanced by lyrical coloration. While not exactly ugly, it seems thus incomplete.

Also on display are three small black and white monotypes, one of them, "Iron," with a bold red diagonal slash in acrylic gouache. Their clarity-in-denseness distinguishes them from Zarem's paintings, with their areas of occasional murkiness. "Ground Nest" is the most compelling of these and one of the most so in "States": splotchy delicate black, horizontal and wavy brushstrokes, dark rectangles inflected with worlds of texture.

Although very much in the tradition of mid 20th-century American abstraction, Zarem's paintings hold their own.

Zarem is a Cornell BFA who had a successful exhibiting career in New York City in the nineties. This is her first solo show since returning to Ithaca several years ago. Although small in size and somewhat casual in presentation (The Corners Gallery is primarily a frame shop), this an exhibition filled with sophisticated and occasionally superb work.

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