

Heaven, Hell, and Earth

New Muse members: Diane Pastella, Pam Seretny, and Gabrielle Russomagno at their new location.

Muse, a cooperative gallery of women artists, inaugurated its Olde City space with a showing of Welsh artists at the end of May. It's now showing the work of three new members. The conjunction of cool

BY ROBIN RICE

2-D abstractionist Diane Pastella, raw assemblage artist Pam Seretny, and detached b/w photographer Gabrielle Russomagno amply demonstrates that Muse does not have a stylistic or ideological agenda.

Diane Pastella is showing cerebral abstractions: both collages and paintings. The four landscape-related paintings could be described as meditations on the color blue. Most of each canvas is painted a flat pastel blue — a different tint for each work. The saturated color resonates like a vast cloudless sky. *Sky Only Sunset* suggests *l'heure bleue*, the twilight hour. Irregular bands of zig-zag brushstrokes in chalky wheats, lilacs, and blues are layered within a carefully delineated central rectangle outlined in yet another blue. The value range of these colors is so small that a positive/negative ambiguity is set up within the fields of brushstrokes.

In *Sky, Mountain, and Cornfield, Cut Through* there are three rectangles of differing proportions floating in the greenish slate blue field. Scribbles and dashes fill these central areas. The lowest is a horizontal broken into vertical stripes vaguely like a planted field.

Although the inner area shapes are composed of many calligraphically executed strokes, Pastella's method in all these works is highly controlled, almost mechanical. They are serene and pleasing to the eye. Whether they offer much food for thought is another question. These undemanding abstractions seem like the visual analogue to dreamy New Age synthesizer music: relaxing pleasant sensory stimulation with no hassles.

Pastella is also showing a group of small fabric collages in natural browns, blacks, and whites. They, too, emphasize rectangles within rectangles, textures, layering, and subtle color relationships. Like the blue paintings, the color field — in this case, fabric field — becomes a source of singular beauty. These works are constructed of partially unraveled fabrics and therefore

have a more improvisational feel. *Remembering #2* and *Remembering #3* have centers of torn canvas: one of duck with a jagged cut or rip and one of linen with a wide vertical unraveling. In other collages, squares of an organdy-like fabric are layered effectively.

To turn from the wall exhibiting Pastella's work to that dominated by Pam Seretny is to travel from Heaven to Hell in an instant. Seretny's work is characterized by lots of blood red paint and images which might not be suitable for very young children; they certainly disturbed me.

She has made four of her six assemblages on real doors which are leaned against the gallery wall. Her title *Inside Out*, which actually identifies the single work made from a window, could be applied to the ideas in all these pieces in which the metaphorical potential of the door is fully explored.

The door in at least one work suggests the locked door of a psychiatric ward in which a person might be confined against her will; however, the title *Re-Quest* suggests something partly — but not entirely — positive about the hospital whose torn electrostatic materials ("...explanation of any restraints or restrictions to which you may be subject...") are part of the

work. Hand silhouettes draped with chains suggest that the restriction of freedom, through institutionalization, is cruel or at least very painful.

It's All in Her Head is Seretny's only work on canvas, but the canvas here is interrupted with many tiny doors and windows opening onto coffins, impaled figures, and other mysteriously creepy scenes. *The Wedding Party* combines religious and wedding imagery in an implicitly violent tableau.

Keys figure prominently in several pieces: keys to the door, keys to memory, keys to understanding. *BAD* is the most disturbing work. Like others by Seretny, it suggests child abuse, but the realistic baby doll nailed to the center of the door with liberal anointings of "blood" is most explicit. The nail has been driven through an ornate lock casing, a suggestion of rape. The impaled baby holds a key in one hand and a red flower in the other.

After Heaven and Hell, what could be more appropriate than Earth. A kind of down-to-earth objectivity seems to permeate Gabrielle Russomagno's silver prints, all of people or parts of people. One untitled group emphasizes ankles, knees and hands, and hands and eyes. The focus is very tight so that, for example, in the ankle picture the foreshortened toes are just blurs. An armpit picture, *Paul #2*, which is displayed with a headshot of *Paul #1* has a more abstracted, landscape-like quality. We know it's part of a body, but which part? It takes a second look to be sure.

Russomagno is also showing several pictures of girls. In one the child blandly confronts camera, her expression absorbed and impenetrable. That of a cat who has decided to remain aloof no matter how loudly you call. The fair fragrant looking creatures are little more than appealing young animals. Their complex psychological processes are hidden, but paradoxically, this deliberate distancing sensitizes us to subtleties of clothing and setting. *Angie* dressed up in a '50s poodle skirt, stands awkwardly shoeless in a nice clean kitchen. The '50s are as inaccessible to her as the Roman Empire.

Most of these compositions are static. The most complex — though relatively simple in its whole range of photographic possibilities — is the most memorable. *Jackie and Diane* are putting hands in a kind of mirror image. One has her back to the camera and is twisted slightly to one side while the other turns in the opposite direction toward the camera. Her eyes are half-focused, neither deeply involved in the game nor in the photographic process. Contrasting stripe and polka-dot patterns add to the interplay of pattern.

"New Members: Diane Pastella, Gabrielle Russomagno, and Pam Seretny," Muse Gallery, 64 N. 2nd, 627-5310, through July 14.



PAM SERETNY, "BAD," MIXED MEDIA WOOD DOOR.