

Distinct styles complement one another

NEWPORT — When you walk into the Newport Art Museum's large Ilgenfritz Gallery to see "The Abstract in Realism," it won't take long to grasp that three distinct styles of paintings and drawings are included in the exhibition.

The wall opposite as you enter the gallery presents a row of quietly dramatic portraits drawn in charcoal on Mylar (a clear, film-like material) by Nancy Gaucher-Thomas. On your right are Gretchen Dow Simpson's meditations on architectural details and the landscape. On your left is a progression of Mimo Gordon Riley's colorful, mosaic-like tree paintings. The final wall holds a number of subtle watercolors with rich surface patinas by Gaucher-Thomas, who is a signature member of the National Watercolor Society.

Different artists, different subjects, distinct styles: What ties this exhibition together?

To begin with, the three women are friends and colleagues and have known each other for many years, though this is the first time they have exhibited together. The exhibition includes drawings and paintings, but these artists are known primarily as painters and they all work in a realist manner, meaning that they portray people, places and things in a representational way.

Riley, Simpson and Gaucher-Thomas also share a strong sense of composition, an appreciation for mystery, and an approach to their representational paintings and drawings that incorporates many of the characteristics we usually associate with abstract art.

Comparing the three styles, Gaucher-Thomas says, "We all tend to work in series.



'Begin,' 2010, by Mimo Gordon Riley, oil on canvas



'Cuttyhunk II,' 2006, by Gretchen Dow Simpson, oil on linen

Even though we work in a representational manner, each new painting is approached with formal consideration of the two-dimensional surface. They all seem grounded and quiet. (Mine) are black and white; Gretchen's — subtle neutral



'Bianca VI,' 2010, by Nancy Gaucher-Thomas, charcoal on Mylar

color; and Mimo's are more intense in color. They seem to complement each other."

One key to understanding the connections between the artworks is geometry, an abstract concept we usually associate with artists like Piet Mondrian, Mark Rothko

or Josef Albers. Gaucher-Thomas, Riley and Simpson think about their work analytically. Their minds are engaged with the core forms and structures that will underlie their finished artworks.

Geometric forms are easi-

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est to see in Simpson's work, which often emphasizes proportion and the way objects relate to each other: the steep diagonal of a roof as it slants down to the eaves and the horizontal line of the horizon that divide the image into rectangles and triangles. Simpson is well-known nationally for her crisp, geometric explorations of architectural details, 58 of which appeared as covers of *The New Yorker* magazine between 1974 and 1993. Commenting on Simpson's work, Riley says, "I have watched her work develop since she stopped doing covers, becoming more painterly, more voluminous, but there always remains that remarkably unmistakable Dow Simpson image of the hidden staircase, or the glimpse through a window in the late afternoon sun."

In her carefully composed, colorful tree paintings, Riley flips the conventional relationship of object and background on its head. She thinks of her intensely colored skies as figures or forms, while the tile-like shapes of leaves and branches become "negative space." Gaucher-Thomas says, "I am always intrigued by the marks alone that Mimo makes on her canvas. They are direct, simple and honest. Combined they make up a series of abstract shapes that ultimately become the trees

that she is known for."

"For each of us there is importance in leaving things out," says Gaucher-Thomas. In an essay about the exhibition, Catherine Boisseau writes that in Gaucher-Thomas portraits such as "Strip House, NYC," "a strong figure is set adrift against a suggested background, centering attention on the personality and universality of the figure."

Mystery pervades the images in "The Abstract in Realism." We wonder what daydream has cast that faraway look into the eyes of the women Gaucher-Thomas portrays. Riley's rich layering of colors and interlocking shapes add depth and mystery to her images as we try to orient ourselves to the perspective she presents. Are we looking at a random mosaic of tiles, or up into a canopy of leaves, or through the branches just outside a window? Simpson zooms in on arbitrary details and combines patterns in ways that can be perplexing and even disorienting.

Though they begin with considerations of formal matters such as geometry, composition and surface, the work Gaucher-Thomas, Riley and Simpson produce is charged with emotion. Boisseau describes the works as, "by turns moody, contemplative, serene or mysterious."

"The Abstract in Realism: Nancy Gaucher-Thomas, Gretchen Dow Simpson, Mimo Gordon Riley" is on view at the Newport Art Museum through Jan. 2.

"At the Museum," provided by the Newport Art Museum, appears monthly in The Daily News. For more information, call 848-8200 or visit www.newportartmuseum.org.