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Art

NEO-ROCOCO

LAUREL SPARKS AT YEZERSKI, PLUS JULIE MILLER, SHEILA GALLAGHER,
DARREN FOOTE, AND MICHAEL ELLIS

_BY GREG COOK



ARCHANGEL Sparks combines 1940s and '50s Abstract Expressionism with 1980s Rainbow Brite glam.

Jamaica Plain's **LAUREL SPARKS** has become one of our best local abstract painters, as her new collection of bright, fun, juicy, abstracted chandeliers at Howard Yezerski Gallery (460 Harrison Avenue, through March 10) attests. They're all charming sweetness and decadence. (She calls them "portraits of glamour and decay.") And, boy, she has a way with paint.

Sparks appears to begin her compositions with meandering marker drawings outlining the shapes of chandeliers. On top, she slathers chalky acrylic paint, silver enamel, marble dust, glitter. The paint is by turns gritty or drippy. The compositions feel like coloring books joyously colored outside the lines.

A 2006 series took off from Christmas trees. Paintings she had in the DeCordova Museum's 2007 exhibit "Big Bang! Abstract Painting for the 21st Century" suggested blooming coral, flowers, and bejeweled, masked ogres. But chandeliers have been her primary motif since at least 2004. In earlier works in this series, she stuck close to the original silhouette of the light fixtures. Here the underlying inspiration has been more subsumed by the act of painting itself, and the paintings are the richer for it.

Afficionados of Boston painting may see connections between Hyman Bloom's *sturm*

und *drang* Expressionist paintings of Christmas trees and synagogue chandeliers of the 1930s and '40s. (Some were shown at the Danforth Museum in 2007.) Bloom transformed the objects' glow into spiritual force. The painter Bernard Chaet tells a story that Willem de Kooning told him: he and Jackson Pollock saw these paintings at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1942 and thought Bloom a charter Abstract Expressionist.

Sparks has that same sort of painterly sophistication, but six decades on, who can pretend that God and life and existential everything depend on the fate of a canvas? Instead, Sparks's paintings explore unabashedly seductive beauty. Her chandeliers in cotton-candy pinks and bubblegum blues bring to mind the sumptuous rococo gowns, hair-dos, and let-them-eat-cake desserts of Sofia Coppola's 2006 film *Marie Antoinette*, a portrait of the queen as a moneybags new-wave party gal. Just as Coppola combined old (1770s and '80s) with retro (1980s), Sparks seems to combine 1940s and '50s Ab Ex with 1980s Rainbow Brite glam (which seems to be everywhere these days).

Here and there she sticks on papier-mâché, felt balls, and wire flowers. Some of it turns into unsightly gobs resembling tar or gum stuck under a table—but these ugly bits are accents that make all the rest seem even sweeter.



BULB Whatever it's ultimate meaning, Foote's how-did-he-do-that craftsmanship is astonishing.

At Judi Rotenberg Gallery (130 Newbury Street, through March 1), **SHEILA GALLAGHER** of Jamaica Plain presents her first Boston exhibition since she showed at the Institute of Contemporary Art as one of the finalists for its 2006 Foster Prize. Gallagher is known for technical feats in multiple media—her ICA show included paintings made from smoke, a video, and (my favorite piece in that show) a wall of live flowers, with built-in irrigation, that vaguely formed a picture of a cloud and grandly evoked the particularly middle-class sublime of wedding corsages and trickling desktop Zen fountains.

Here she offers new paintings of a horse-shoe crab and a sea urchin made by staining the canvases brown, blue, black, and green with smoke. The images are just okay. And the neat-o trick of how they were made doesn't register because it's not apparent from the pictures themselves.

In two other works here, I'm told, she aims to contemplate the spiritual in everyday life. Her video *SOS* features blue smoke and the voices of Buddhist chanting mixed with catalogues of daily tasks: call mom, get groceries, fold laundry. *Daily Calendar Mandala* turns scans of her datebooks—which list appointments and to-do lists—into a six-foot-wide mandala. But her cataloguing of the mundane duties of daily life doesn't transform them into something special. It just feels like data processing.

Also at Rotenberg, **DARREN FOOTE** of South Boston (the fiancé of Rotenberg director Kristen Dodge) fashions oak and poplar into trompe-l'oeil mutant furniture. A chair has crumpled. Wooden "rays" from a table lamp bend the top of a table. A pair of chairs standing next to each other seem to have been wounded on their abutting sides by some mysterious menace that's melted the seats and spindles down to jagged edges.

His standout sculpture is *Bulb*. A bare lightbulb dangling from the ceiling appears to have been shattered and the shards scattered across the floor. Foote has carved and assembled it all from unpainted poplar—right down to the curling filament inside the cracked bulb. It's stained wood, so you always know it's wood, but the verisimilitude of the shapes is so convincing that your mind keeps insisting it's a real lightbulb. Foote is still figuring out how to imbue his how-did-he-do-that sleight-of-hand with rich meaning, but his craftsmanship is astonishing.

Read Greg Cook's blog at gregcookland.com/ journal.

Steven Zevitas Gallery (450 Harrison Avenue, through February 28) is also focusing on abstraction with a show of **JULIE MILLER**'s new, brightly hued pen drawings. This Bostonian fills sheets of paper with zillions of teeny fine-line circles. Her similar drawings in DeCordova's "Big Bang" exhibition suggested microscopic views of skin or circulating blood cells. The works here feel more like straight-up abstractions focused on a single color or a few similar hues. *o(18)* features purple and blue stripes; *o(19)* is a slippery field of red and orange circles that seem to shift and subtly throb. Sometimes they bring to mind dotted color-blindness test charts.

The territory Miller is working reminds me of Ad Reinhardt's 1950s and '60s paintings of squares and crosses in slightly shifting variations of a single color (blue, black, green, violet). The extreme subtlety of the color gave the Reinhardts a quiet transcendental hum. Miller hasn't nailed it yet, but her drawings could be headed toward a busier and more buzzing version of that kind of color jolt.

MICHAEL ELLIS of Boston also demonstrates his mastery of craft, with photorealist paintings at Anthony Creaney Gallery (450 Harrison Avenue, through March 28). One looks like a blow-up of a postcard of a mountain range. (It's actually from a photo taken by Ellis's brother.) Up close it seems to have been painted mainly with lots of grayed blue and green horizontal and vertical brushstrokes, but step back five feet and it becomes a crisp photo.

Another painting, this time rendered in soft areas of color, replicates a photo from Ellis's art-school graduation party at his family's Weymouth home. It seems like a mundane still-life snapshot of a half-eaten cake, paper napkins decorated with balloon motifs, and paper plates saying "congratulations" and printed with graduation caps. What gets me is the TV remote sitting at the right—a precisely observed detail that identifies the scene as early-2000s middle-class.

There is melancholy here, but mostly the images are so distant and buttoned up that they leave me cold, even as I marvel at Ellis's sharp observation and painting chops.