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DENVER
Westword

Review: One Piece Down at DAM, Two Galleries Changing Things Up

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While I am 100 percent behind giving the Denver Art Museum's Ponti tower a facelift, now that it's been shuttered, I'm mourning this significant loss — temporary though it is — to the city's cultural life. It was the right move, especially considering the awful alternatives of either allowing the building to get more run down or demolishing it altogether. Still, having this original portion of the museum closed until the work is completed in 2021 — the building's fiftieth anniversary — makes this worthy project as bitter as it is sweet.

I checked out "Lao Tzu" one last time a couple of days before it was dismantled, when I was in the neighborhood to catch the current offerings at Goodwin Fine Art. The contemplative mood in the main space at Goodwin, where Martha Russo: circumvolo is on view, is a welcome relief from the hurly-burly of the endless construction going on in the Golden Triangle. The elegant show is filled with the Boulder-area artist's latest exercises in creating sculptural installations out of aggregations of small elements done in clay, porcelain, paper and other materials in a range of shapes and colors. Although these works are signature Russo, they struck me as having subtly changed stylistically — and, in some cases, actually, as a few are reformulated earlier works.



"Lao Tzu," Mark di Suvero, in front of the Ponti tower.



Martha Russo, "klynge," mixed materials.

Russo's classic pieces evoke undersea life such as corals and other inhabitants of the ocean floor, not only in the way that the artist has clustered the various parts, but also because the individual components are often based on the shape of shells or even tentacles. In "klynge," for instance, Russo has put a repeating clamshell motif together with other naturalistic shapes so that they rise off the wall, with a few strays trailing off on one side. The color scheme of subtle reds, greens and browns lends the piece an added richness.

Despite the literal references to shellfish, the overall character of "klynge" and other Russo sculptures is abstract. More surprising, this abstract quality is present even when Russo uses found materials that are recognizable as such, as in "lightness of being." For that piece, she dipped items such as carrot tops and socks in porcelain slip, then scattered them across the back corner, where they are suspended slightly out from the walls by nearly invisible filaments. Taken together, the sculptures in *circumvolo* — which means "to run around" — create their own completely enveloping atmosphere.

The Russo show transitions flawlessly into Kimberlee Sullivan: *Limnology*, which begins across from "lightness of being" and proceeds into the back space. The show's title refers to inland waterways, continuing the watery theme established by Russo. For her part, Sullivan captures fleeting moments seen on the surface of water in highly abstracted paintings and works on paper. Most comprise color fields dominated by the reflected blues and greens of the sky, but a few are taken over by the blazing red-orange of the sunrise or sunset.

An enormous diptych titled "Sphere Cycle, Night Equals Day" sets the mood. The left panel is covered in blacks and blues, with scribbled forms in chalk-like strokes floating at the top. The right is dazzling in shades of white and off-white, with that chalky effect completely covering the surface. Also notable is a group of six works on paper, each setting scribble marks against an all-over field of color. The piece that most obviously suggests water is "Stream Level I," two square panels lined up horizontally with arching lines suggesting the wavelets on the surface of a lake. To seal the illusion, Sullivan has covered her marks in shiny resin so that the piece looks like it's wet.



“Good Girl” and “Come, Stay,” by Linda Herritt, image from installation “Good Girl.”

Down at Rule Gallery on Santa Fe Drive, Linda Herritt: Good Girl includes works that employ abstracted text done with paper, fabrics, fringe and watercolor stains. Herritt taught for nearly twenty years at the University of Colorado Boulder; during that time, her work was shown at Rule and the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver. She left Colorado in 2000 and moved to New York, where she still lives. Her work has changed considerably in that time, and these recent pieces have just a thread of a connection to the kind of work she did when she lived here. And “thread” is the key word, because her Colorado pieces used draperies to build installations; in these newer works, the fabric has been reduced to a secondary role.

The works on paper contain screens of letters that seem to float over scraps of fabric — often simply photo-copies of bits of cloth or crocheted pieces. The shared palette is quiet, with sepias and touches of green done in watercolor washes. At first the soft geometry of the letters appears to form a non-objective pattern, because Herritt has jammed the letters together in such a way that they are all but impossible to read. However, she indicates the phrases she’s conveying through the titles, all dog commands: “Good Girl,” “Come, Stay,” “Stay Down.” The wall installations carry on the theme; in “Roll Over,” though, the letters are the areas that have been left blank, filled in by segments of ripped fabrics in bright colors.

Herritt introduces a dynamic juxtaposition in these works: the contrast between the suggestion of control in the commands themselves and the lack of control represented by the flowing watercolors in the works on paper, or the imprecision of the torn fabrics in the wall installations.

The shows at Goodwin and Rule run right up to the holidays, so there's plenty of time to catch them. But if you missed the di Suvero before it was packed up, you'll have to wait several years to see it again.



Linda Herritt, "Roll Over" mixed materials