

Emerging artists and temporary gallery space get first look

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This week the New Jersey Center for the Visual Arts opened its new, temporary gallery in the Enterprise Mall on Maple Street in Summit, a freshly scrubbed former cigar shop with white walls and blond, polyurethaned floors -- just like a commercial gallery.

NJCVA's permanent home on Elm Street is undergoing extensive renovations through the rest of the winter season, and while regular classes will continue there during the construction work, it would be an impossible space for hosting exhibitions.

So we have "First Look 2004: Emerging Artists Series," a show of three artists who, by the lights of gallery coordinator Mari D'Alessandro, have not yet received the attention they deserve. Eric Jiaju Lee, Alyce Gottesman and Lily Prince all work in abstract forms, and together they create a colorful display with just a slight fizz of Concept underneath -- a debut that is calculated to give the new gallery an immediate profile in Summit.

NJCVA is actually doing a double opening with the advanced private gallery in Summit, the Domo, which is just around the corner at 447 Springfield Ave. The Domo Gallery is showing "Jordan Eagles: Continuum," a show of paintings done with resin and cheesecloth on Plexiglas, mixed with animal blood. "Eagles" won an award at the NJCVA last year.

The most intense color in "First Look" is provided by Gottesman, who makes encaustic paintings that she then polishes with a cotton cloth until they shine like slabs of marble. Encaustic (the term is from the Greek) is one of the oldest extant painting techniques, a way of suspending pigments in hot wax. Like linseed oil, the wax is nearly transparent (skewed just a bit toward the yellow). Laid down in thin layers, you can work up a very deep, saturated hue in encaustic, and that is what Gottesman does.

Most of her work is small -- the largest painting here is 30- by 22 inches -- but even the least among them has real presence. "Undulate" is a personal favorite, a series of blue-green stripes with a dull orange edge cut off by a deeply illogical black corner.

All the pieces suggest surfaces of great age, but several are also incised to reveal lower layers of encaustic that are in contrasting colors. "Inside Out" appears to have been incised, then covered with light blue paint, and then polished so the lines alone hold the light blue color, leaving thinly etched sky blue lines across the darkling surface.

Prince is showing "drawings" that are far more evanescent -- they are done with candle smoke on paper, leaving a smudgy sfumato that she titles, in series, "Cumulus." They remind you of Lee Bontecu's drawings with an acetylene torch, but Prince is not into handmade stencils or clever games with fixative. Covered with her own fingerprints, the "Cumulus" series is more like Prince's version of Vilja Clemins' paintings of the ocean surface or distant galaxies. These works present an infinitely receding subject in just a few microns of paper surface.

Although all three artists are mixed together on the walls of the Maple Street gallery, you can read them on a kind of entropy scale, going from Gottesman, as the artist with the most specific control of her materials, through Prince's paintings with smoke, to Eric Jiaju Lee.

Lee makes his marks in several ways, but most of them involve chance. Lee pours or drips his

acrylics on unprimed canvas, satin, taffeta and silk, leaving loopy puddles of flat color or great veined stains that bleed through the fabric. He also dabs color thickly with a brush, to make a multicolored stipple that stands up in relief from the surface, or he can render patterns in thin sheets of plastic paint.

It is almost as if Lee is displaying different techniques for working in acrylics. Each picture could be a piece of embroidery covered in discrete sections with different sample stitches, only here each section demonstrates another way to thin or thicken acrylics.

When Lee's surface is a dyed fabric, you can't help but be reminded of the Pattern Painters of the '80s, or the brief '90s fad for painting on contrasting printed fabrics collaged together. "Guan Yin," which is painted on red satin, has a sandy blue lagoon wandering across its surface and oddly organ-like puddles of paint hovering above the picture plane. You think of inflated stomachs, or displaced spleens, floating in a space of pure color.

There is a lot of biomorphic abstraction around today.

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