

Galleries

Canvas of Change

Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman Focuses on Diversity

By FERDINAND PROTZMAN
Special to The Washington Post

When Catherine Jones and Sally Troyer opened a gallery in 1983, they were freshly minted photography graduates of the Corcoran School of Art with a few things to learn, like how to run a commercial art space in a highly competitive environment.

In the gallery's original location at 1614 20th St. NW, the early exhibitions focused on the owners' area of expertise: contemporary photography, particularly color landscapes by rising stars such as John Pfahl. In terms of what they were offering, the partners had impeccable timing since color photography was beginning to gain international recognition as a serious art form in the 1980s. But they quickly discovered that even a hot product requires marketing.

"We had a lot to learn, like how to sell pictures," Troyer recalls. "And we learned on the job. The first buyer we had was a photography collector. When he came in, I told him everything I knew about the art, the artist and the process. He listened patiently, then asked me if we were actually planning to sell these works. That was a way of saying my approach was too academic."

But Troyer and Jones proved to be quick studies, and the business, which has evolved into the Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman Gallery, is currently staging a lively 15th anniversary exhibition. The group show is not a retrospective, but a sampler of recent efforts by the gallery's artists, including paintings by established figures such as Willem de Looper, Mindy Weisel and Paula Crawford, as well as work by recent art school graduates such as Hsin-Hsi Chen and Jason Gubbiotti.

The diverse program and emphasis on Washington-based artists were not what the two Corcoran classmates set out to do. But their tastes and interests were expanding, even as the gallery prospered during the art market boom of the 1980s. Sandy Fitzpatrick, an author, former teacher in the Washington public schools and passionate art collector, joined the founding duo in 1988, when they decided to broaden the gallery's scope.

"I knew nothing about photography compared to Katie and Sally. They were the experts," Fitzpatrick says. "But they wanted to change and include other kinds of work, particularly paintings by local artists. I had been very involved with visual art in Washington for 25 years, and I knew a lot of people, so it was a good fit."

Tougher times arrived with the current decade. After a battle with cancer, Jones died in 1990. At roughly the same time, the art boom fizzled out and the gallery had to move from its quarters on 20th Street because its law firm landlord needed more space. Troyer and Fitzpatrick weathered those changes by tightening their belts and moving to a larger space on Connecticut Avenue. They also asked local art consultant Vivienne Lassman to become their partner.

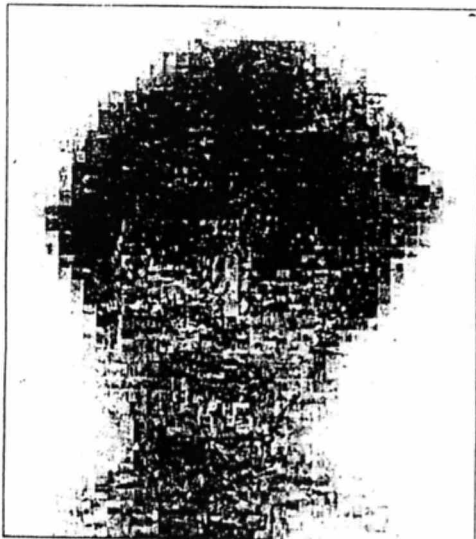
"I already had a business I could incorporate into the gallery, and joining them allowed me to do exhibitions," says Lassman, who brought artists such as Chen, Richard Law and Austin Thomas to the gallery. "One of my main interests was to exhibit artists from this area, particularly younger, emerging artists. I also wanted to show more sculpture, something they hadn't really been doing. We all took a risk,

that it was a good match."

Painting dominates the anniversary exhibition, reflecting the gallery's evolution from its early days as strictly a photography venue. The show is also a testimony to the three partners' taste and to the high quality of art being produced in this area.

In keeping with Washington's art history, most of the painted works are large, abstract and loaded with color. Willem de Looper and Mindy Weisel, two of the city's best-known painters, share a wall in the gallery's front room. De Looper's appropriately titled "Anniversary II" is a masterly acrylic-on-paper abstraction in which fields of strong color shimmer and flow. It is flanked by Weisel's two mixed-media-on-paper works, which seem to hum with the energy of her slashing, scrubbing strokes and rich, vibrant colors.

The most impressive work, however, is by Paula Crawford, a relative newcomer to the gallery and to Washington, having moved here from New York two years ago. At her show in September 1996, Crawford was overlaying patterns taken from Renaissance lace on a blue-



Inga Frick's "Identity" (1996) is part of Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman Gallery's 15th anniversary exhibition.

black, abstract-expressionist background in her oil paintings. While the paintings were lovely, they were also much like those of art star Ross Bleckner.

Since then, she has moved away from the lace patterns and blurred the distinction between the overlaid figures and the background, giving her work a restless fluidity. Crawford's figures have a loose, free, rhythmic geometry instead of the tetchy quality of some of the lace patterns. The backgrounds are deeper, more intricate and more absorbing. Touches of bright color seem to rise to the surface like light from a distant star.

The exhibition also features several paintings by Jason Gubbiotti, who just graduated from the Corcoran School of Art. Gubbiotti is a very talented artist whose abstract style and seductive surfaces reflect the influence of his work as an assistant to Robin Rose, one of Washington's leading abstract painters. Gubbiotti's paintings are beautiful, meticulously crafted and derivative. It will be interesting to see how his work develops as he gains life experience. As Sally Troyer can attest, there's a lot to learn once you get out of school.

Anniversary Summer Party, at Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman, 1710 Connecticut Ave. NW, Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 202-328-7189 through