

GALLERIES

Watercolors that mirror historic marble frieze

Art galleries: What's showing around Boston

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 16, 2011



Wendy Artin's 4-foot-high by 50-inch-wide watercolor "Craggy Face" at Gurari Collections.

WENDY ARTIN: The Parthenon Friezes

At: Gurari Collections, 460 Harrison Ave., through Nov. 28. 617-367-9800, www.gurari.com

WENDY ARTIN: The Parthenon Friezes

The Parthenon frieze captured in marble, in the fifth century BC, a grand procession through Athens. Horses prance and snort. Muscular riders, wearing little more than flowing drapes, gesture boldly. It was a sculptural feat, distilling action, pageantry, and anatomy with remarkable precision and gusto.

Part of that frieze, known as the Elgin Marbles, fills a gallery at the British Museum. Watercolorist Wendy Artin, who lives in Rome, for years visited London and admired the frieze. Now she has painted it and it is on view at Gurari Collections.

The evolution from life to marble sculpture to - so many centuries later - watercolor is an apt metaphor. Time dissolves even monuments until eventually they are only memory, as ineffable as the light playing on shadow that is the stuff of watercolors.

Artin, a master of her medium, evokes that dissolution. Her works deftly convey the perfect bodies of the young men and their horses (and an errant bull). But she is not going for the same illustrious fiction that the original sculptor or sculptors strived for. With equal care, Artin conveys the wearing away of limbs and noses, and the mottled erosion of the ancient marble.

Several of her paintings are made to scale, stretching across two or three sheets of paper to more than 3 feet by 4 feet - a heroic size for a watercolorist. One of these, "Craggy Face," testifies to the ravages of time. We can make out the heads of three men, and the noble form of a horse, but it's a bit like searching for bunnies in a thundercloud. Certainly, a viewer of the museum's pieces of the frieze would strain to make a narrative out of the disappearing forms.

But Artin fastidiously conveys the chipped, rugged surface of the worn-down marble, engaging equally with the forms we can make out and with every inch of the crumbling relief. She evokes an electric tension between what representation is left and the apparent abstraction that is eating it up.

The imagery is crisper in “Sacred Bull.” What a sculpture! A rider appears to lose control of a bull, whose head jerks upward and lands on the shoulder of a man who looks to the rider, but points directly at the viewer. The bull is intact, save for his tail. The facial features of the men are largely gone, but not that directive finger. Artin elegantly depicts the smooth modeling of the animal’s great shoulder, the delicate drapery of the men’s clothing, and the rough, pebbling decay of the stone around them as the edges of the frieze break off into shadow.

There are a few graceful still lifes and nudes in this show, as well, and while lovely, those simple, small works mostly serve to amplify the magnitude and intricacy of Artin’s magnificent frieze paintings.

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