

By Cate McQuaid  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WITH PENCIL, BRUSH AND  
CHARCOAL: WORKS ON PAPER BY  
WENDY ARTIN

At: *Wiggin Gallery, Boston Public  
Library, Copley Square, through Dec. 1*

POLLY THAYER STARR:  
DRAWINGS

At: *Copley Society, 158 Newbury St.,  
through Nov. 23*

Two drawing shows by graduates of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts can be seen just one block from each other in Copley Square; the artists, however, are many generations removed. Wendy Artin, who got her MFA at the Museum School in 1990, has an exhibit of her classically beautiful works at the Wiggin Gallery of the Boston Public Library. Polly Thayer Starr, a doyenne of Boston painting from way back, attended the Museum School more than 60 years ago. A survey of her drawings hangs at the Copley Society.

You can see in Artin's works on paper that for her, to draw is an act of love. She infuses every figure, every landscape with spirit that comes from her deep attentiveness of her materials. Charcoal drawings, like a rendering of a cast of the god Dionysus, appear as in a puff of smoke, full-blown and randy. Her studies of statues look not like marble or plaster but flesh; Dionysus looks downward, with a sly glint in his eye.

Inky washes, dusty charcoal drawings, transparent paint on rabbit-skin paper all attest to the artist's delight in her material. Her watercolors of walls convey age, decay, sunlight and the marks of man; as she says in her artist's statement, watercolor "lends itself to wall paintings almost organically, washing like rain, dripping like a stain, spreading like graffiti, and painting like paint over everything but a skinny edge of light."

Starr's work is less expressive

and more prim than Artin's. That may be a reflection of her generation, studying in Boston in the '30s with Philip Hale. Her early drawings are clearly studies - careful, even chilly portraits and nude figures. Where Artin's careful attention to technique transforms her work into something glowing and alive, Starr's close attention to detail and line seems to rein her in; we can tell nothing of these people from these portraits.

However, Starr's later work loosens. Three haunting drawings of cyclamens are laced with foreboding and hope. Portrayed from up close, a la Georgia O'Keeffe, the petals of these flowers hurtle and flap outward like freshly washed sheets. In "Oncoming Storm" (1980), the petals billow beneath a dark butterfly as white raindrops explode in the black around the flower like stars in the night sky. "Ellipses" (1985) has the white form seeming to snap from thin white lines out of pure blackness.

Starr, now in her 90s, never made it on the national scene. Perhaps if she had started the kind of work she's done in the last 20 years earlier, that would have been different.

In the Copley Society's basement gallery, there's a small group show of three accomplished painters. Jessie Pollock's still lifes feature crisply painted, scarred pears standing bold against soft-focus landscapes. Some make stages of these pastorals, soaked in evening light, by framing them in a peeling old window frame (as in "Nautilus," where a shell curls midair in one pane over the soft dunes in the pane below) or centering smaller box frames in the middle of the painting. Gregory Bishop's still lifes of pitchers and vases on windowsills are a nice complement to Pollock's, although they are more about form and less about light. And Mark Milowsky's landscapes feature impressionistic brushwork with a richer, more autumnal palette than we are used to seeing in this style.