

Finding inspiration in the city's patchwork vistas

By DAN TRANBERG

Love it or hate it, Cleveland's haphazard mixture of new and old industrial, residential, and commercial structures forms the framework of the city's energy. Smokestacks loom ominously over tiny wood-framed houses. Dirty old factory buildings rub shoulders with crisp new housing developments. And countless bridges slice across the landscape with minds of their own. For some, the chaotic diversity is invigorating; for others, it's a nightmare.

REVIEW

Bockrath Gallery

"Urban Landscapes: New Paintings by Lissa Bockrath" is on view at Bockrath Gallery, 2026 Murray Hill Rd., Cleveland, through Dec. 24. Hours are 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, 1-5 p.m. Sunday. Free. Call (216) 721-5990.

ward discordant and conventionally unappealing juxtapositions. A road sign in front of an ornate church might be an eyesore for some, but for Bockrath it's an element of truth and beauty.

Oil on photos

Her process is as unconventional as her perspective. She begins by taking color photographs of city scenes, then paints loosely with oils directly on the photographic paper. Some details of the image remain visible while others are completely obscured. In the best of her works the paint not only masks out superfluous information but also makes visible the conflicting energies of the scene. In "Comfort Zone III," the space between a commercial building and a traditional house is filled with a storm of blue and white brushstrokes, exposing the irony of seeing a parking lot as a comfortable separation between a home and an office building.

"Labor's Refuge" shows a run-down wooden

house, the kind often referred to in real estate ads as a worker's cottage. Its dilapidated picket fence and sloping yard lend it a sentimental charm like something out of an Andrew Wyeth painting. But smokestacks in the background of the scene reveal the true nature of its setting. Like many such houses in Cleveland, its proximity to the factories belies its initial country charm.

It's a good example of Bockrath using the characteristics of each medium to optimum effect. The photographic image provides factual details while the paint is used to focus the statement of the piece. A particularly effective area is the yellow siding of the house covered with diluted paint. It's like a stain, evidence of the bizarre contrast between the structure and its surroundings. The result, while it could easily be seen as negative, possesses a raw and gritty beauty.

"Spanning the Margins" is another example of an effective merging of the photographic image and paint. Most of the lower half of the image is covered with loose brushstrokes. But certain details of the photograph, like green highway signs on the Shoreway, are left in order to highlight the dissonance of the scene. The river, depicted as a powerful natural force, forms the dominant shape in the painting. Its fluidity is accentuated by gray-blue drips over much of its surface. Like another strong work, "Hidden in Ochre Grasses," the piece calls attention to the juxtaposition of industry and nature.

Coming together

Bockrath's use of photography began as a reference for her paintings. She started painting on them as a kind of exercise leading up to works on canvas. A few years ago she realized the potential the combination held for exposing what she calls "the urban paradox." But only recently has this approach led to works that feel resolved.

After graduating from the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1995, she decided to open the Bockrath Gallery, exhibiting her own work as well as the work of other young artists. It was a decision sparked by a desire to have control



"Comfort Zone III."



"One More Than Three."



"Labor's Refuge."

over the presentation of her work and the obvious advantage of not having to pay another gallery its standard 50% commission. Her credibility as an artist could be questioned because she's exhibiting her own work in her own gallery, but others share a high opinion of her work. She also shows at seven other galleries across the country and in Canada.

In a city so much at odds with its various guises, past and present, Bockrath's work provides one view that takes it all in and, at the same time, finds beauty in its contradictions. Its resounding message is that chaos isn't such a bad thing after all.

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