

THE BEST OF 2001

Complex ideas were highlights of exhibits

By Cate McQuaid
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The best exhibitions at Boston-area galleries in the last year touched on grief, comedy, and social commentary. All displayed a degree of technical virtuosity; they excelled in their ability to contain complex ideas. Looking back over the year, it's hard not to view the best shows (the top 10 are in the accompanying list) through the prism of Sept. 11. Even many exhibits that preceded the terrorist attacks provide, in retrospect, opportunities to reflect upon the grief and confusion of the past fall.

For some time, Esther Solondz has examined memory in her mixed-media paintings. In her show at Gallery NAGA, the faces fading under layers of wax and paint were stippled with salt, which suggested the residue of something, or someone, gone. Solondz's paintings traced the border between life and death that is the landscape of grief and memory, with elegance and subtlety.

Abstract painter Wlodzimierz Ksiazek mines similar territory. His show of abstract paintings at Alpha Gallery was up in September, and couldn't have been better timed. Ksiazek's built-up paint reads like scarring; interludes of marbled smoothness promise peace somewhere within the anger and confusion implied by his otherwise rugged surfaces.

Timothy Harney's narrative paintings at the Clark Gallery, also showing in September, were another outlet for grief, using summery colors. His "Mourning Picture for Gregory (After Edwin Romano Elmer)" put a friend of Harney's, the late painter Gregory Gillespie, at the center of a dramatic scene that included Gillespie's ballplayer father and mental-

ly troubled mother.

Sculptor Maggie Stark's show at the Boston Sculptors at Chapel Gallery sprang from the intimations of mortality she had following a traffic accident more than a year ago in which she broke her neck. Her delicate pieces, crafted from glass, clockwork, and light, poetically conveyed the fragility of life and the preciousness of time.

On a much lighter side, Laurel Hughes's paintings of chickens at the Nielsen Gallery strutted with an impressive facility and joy in the application of paint to canvas. At the same time, Hughes captured the meaning humans read into chickens — they're undignified, silly birds — and turned it on

its head, imbuing these nutty birds with wildness and power.

The interplay of Amreen Butti's Pakistani upbringing (and art training) with the more American sensibility of self-realization made her show at the Bernard Toale Gallery her best yet. She used to portray herself stiffly and impersonally in these

works of paint on layers of Mylar; now the self-portraits have taken on her own tenderness and confusion. They portray the conflicts of a Pakistani woman in this country with exquisite precision and openness.

For breathtaking painting, turn to two artists: Peter Brooke, in his second show at Gallery NAGA (he had one in January and one this month), portrays a rushing landscape beneath a still, beneficent sky. Brooke builds his skies with layers of translucent glaze, making subtle shifts of color; the land below is all wild brushwork, suggesting that the terrestrial is more fleeting than the celestial — which, come to think of it, is true enough.

GALLERIES | Cate McQuaid

The 10 best shows of 2001, in no particular order (all exhibits have closed)

- Esther Solondz, "A Perfected State," Gallery NAGA
- Wlodzimierz Ksiazek, Alpha Gallery
- Timothy Harney, "New paintings and Works on Paper," Clark Gallery
- Maggie Stark, "Accidental Vision," Boston Sculptors at Chapel Gallery
- Laurel Hughes, "New Paintings," Nielsen Gallery



Anne Harris's "Portrait (Old New Gallery); Lauren Bon's "Nauja" (left)

Then there's Tom McKinley, the California painter whose first Boston show at Beth Urdang Gallery was filled with crisp, color-saturated works coming together with the precision of a house of cards. Planes of houses and road, or of bookshelves and tabletops, constructed paintings that seem perfect and infused with light. But McKinley, for all his dedication to perfection, always throws a wrench in the works — a small detail, like a library with its shelves emptied — that pricks the viewer's curiosity and makes each painting into a short story.

Another storyteller, photographer David Hilliard, touched on the juicy theme of adolescent desire in his show at Bernard Toale. Hilliard composes his scene then takes many photos of it, which he then tacks together to elongate and distort physical and psychological space. In "Shirts and Skins," boys uneasily confront

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graps tackled the experience of viewing art. Bon took a steel sphere to the National Gallery of Art in London and photographed herself, and the works of art, reflected in the globe. In her show at Miller Block, the sphere stood in for the viewer's eye; what surrounded them suggested the transformation that can occur within a person's psyche when looking at a work of art.

Pat Keck is a perennial favorite. Keck crafts large-scale figures from wood. Her show at Genovese/Sullivan was populated with white-faced, brightly clad puppets

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■ Esther Solondz, "A Perfected State," Gallery NAGA



that belong in a carnival. She mechanizes them to play drums or dispense fortunes. They're fabulously interactive, yet distinctly creepy in their machinations. In a similar vein, Howard Yezzer's exhibition of Mark Mennin's "Man-child" sculptures was a roomful of distinctly disturbing figures. Mennin fashions heads from stone that conflate old age with infancy. They embody the helpless neediness of a baby, with none of the endearing cuteness, yet you cannot look away. It is potent work.

Anne Harris's portraits at the Nielsen Gallery carry that same charge, the one that runs between attraction and repulsion. Harris uses herself and others as models, but she works the skin of the paint over for months, until the characters she portrays become people unto themselves: glowing, witting figures prettied up with gloss and baubles. Carl Jung spoke of the psyche's shadow: Harris pours light on that aspect of the self we shun, and it turns out to be hardly pretty. But it is beautiful.

Living Arts

THE BOSTON GLOBE SATURDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2001

Maggie Stark:
Accidental Vision

At: Boston Sculptors at Chapel Gallery,
60 Highland St., Newton,
through Dec. 16

By Cate McQuaid
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In May of last year, sculptor Maggie Stark's neck was broken when her car was hit head-on by a drunk driver. Three vertebrae were fractured, but Stark was lucky. Today, the only aftereffect she suffers is occasional neck pain.

Still, the experience brought home to the artist how precious time is, and how little of it each one of us has left. "Accidental Vision," her exhibition at Boston Sculptors at Chapel Gallery, uses clockwork, telescopes, light, glass, and images of her spine to explore mortality. It's a timely show; mortality has weighed heavy on many of our minds since Sept. 11.

One piece, which Stark made last spring, eerily echoes the horror at the World Trade Center. "Shatter," a slow-motion video, depicts two light bulbs being struck by BBs, and exploding. Stark shows one bulb at a time: The round shape shattered, with all the light it contained frothing and flooding what little of the glass remains, until it finally dissipates into the dark surroundings. The structure of the bulb is gone. The ricochet and dissolution of light that follows the explosion is a simple illustration of the physics of energy, but in its poignant beauty

becomes a metaphor for life, and life lost.

Stark has crafted glass telescopes, but rather than help us to look out at the cosmos, these instruments force us to gaze inward. Often, you find yourself peering at your own eye. "Time Keep" is an opaque glass tube. At one end, there's a small mirror no bigger than an eye's iris. The other end Stark caps with clear glass with a red dot in the center, from which a red tube travels to the far end of the cylinder, where a second hand ticks. When you look through the clear glass, the clock (and the passage of time) is at once far away and immediate, connected through the body — through sight and the pulsing of blood in the veins.

The spine, which holds us up, is both strong and fragile. The artist has taken X-rays, CAT scans, and MRIs of her vertebrae and printed them as photographs, altering the prints with glass and water. The results are hushed passages of light and dark, a dance of the veils with the spine as the dancer.

When you recognize that time is short, you develop focus, a keen appreciation of beauty, and gratitude. "Accidental Vision" comes from that place, and seeks to awaken others to it.