



Shown are three pieces by Jamie Newton:

(Left) *Trois Collines*, acrylic on museum board.

(Right) *36 Views of Wagner Butte #5*, acrylic on museum board.

(Below) *Cathedral*, acrylic on museum board.



Works by Jamie Newton

Ancient and modern together

At first glance, a clear Asian influence seems to permeate Ashland artist Jamie Newton's abstract landscape paintings in black, white and various pale-yellow or pinkish tints, currently on view at the White Lotus Gallery. But Newton's work is also heir to abstract expressionism, albeit with a whimsical, childlike quality absent in the New York School.

The earlier pieces in the show belong to Newton's *36 Views of Wagner Butte* and *Siskiyou Rain* series. The Wagner Butte works are abstract black-and-white compositions set between mustard-green horizontal bands and sporting a red seal: Newton's stylized initials and a crucial accent of complementary color. The *Siskiyou Rain* works are among his most abstract. All are pieces in which Newton himself sees the most similarity with Japanese *sumi-e* (black ink painting).

Newton had studied photography, pottery, sculpture and painting before his momentous encounter with sumi painting. "I remember what a thrill it was to first pick up a sumi brush," Newton says. Newton uses acrylics on board rather than sumi ink on paper, but his brushstrokes evoke the characteristics of calligraphic marks. He does not achieve the

fluency and precise mastery of calligraphy, which is a rigorous discipline, nor is it his goal. Rather, what he seeks is a quality of spontaneity and freedom in execution.

"This earlier sequence grew out of playing with sketches I do with a sumi-brush fountain pen," Newton explains. "I loved the spontaneity of these sketches, and I tried to see if I could get the same feeling onto a larger surface."

Newton also had a decisive encounter with Aaron Siskind's photography. "Siskind

was my introduction to abstraction," he says, "a significant change in a way of seeing." At the forefront of abstract expressionism in photography, Siskind was a close friend of painter Franz Kline. It is difficult not to think of Kline's black-and-white paintings when looking at Newton's work. Kline's paintings were influential, with their bold black gestural strokes, splatters and smearing seemingly due to chance, and an apparent emphasis on spontaneity of gesture and immediacy of expression.

An obvious difference between the two painters is scale. Kline used huge size for effect. Another is that Newton's work generally contains representational elements, recognizable as such despite being abstracted or stylized. These elements are part of a recurrent vocabulary associated with landscape.

Una Storia della Toscana is characteristic. Abstracted Tuscan landscape elements (cypress trees, olive trees, hills, fields, an archway that could also be a human silhouette) have been assembled into an abstract composition in black, white and pale ochre.



In *Bridge* we discern bridge and arch forms and perhaps a waterfall.

Besides this landscape vocabulary, we find recurring in most of Newton's paintings a series of abstract symbols (Xs, crosses as in *Cathedral*), shapes (cones, circles, rectangles, arches) and patterns (grids, furrows, splatters), all functioning like idiosyncratic cartographic markers. Newton says they possess "a symbol sense without it being specific. I just use them as marks to balance things. But when I look back across all these sets of paintings, I realize I've developed this group of symbols that I return to without noticing."

Symbols and simplified shapes often impart a mood of childlike playfulness and whimsicality to the paintings, intimating that the artist is not taking himself too seriously, which is part of Newton's appeal.

Newton's other profession entails using GIS-based cartographic databases, which also plays with spatial ambiguity. In some paintings the viewpoint seems to be at eye-level (*Bridge*), while in others, we appear to be given a purely aerial view (*Lac Léman I*, with its snowy fields marked by tracks). Many works, however, combine both perspectives in the same painting, such as *Lac Léman III*, with its aerial view of fields and water but profiled tree silhouettes. In *Hillock and Three Trees*, only the hillock and the trees are at eye-level. Everything else is viewed from above. In *Cipriano's Mulberry*, a black and off-white composition, the mulberry tree is profiled, while the rest is entirely ambiguous. The viewer is free to shift perspective from aerial to eye-level perspective.

Find your own perspective at "Paintings by Jamie Newton," at White Lotus Gallery through Feb. 19. The exhibit also includes Dan Schmitt's recent porcelain work. **EW**

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