

First impressions

What a relief to find the perfect medium

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Art can move people or stop them in their tracks.

For nearly a month, pedestrians strolling by Les Yeux du Monde have dropped in just to get a closer look at the exhibit hanging in the Charlottesville gallery.

"I've never seen anything like this before" was heard repeatedly from folks responding to "Reconstructing Art History."

The artist, Stefanie Newman, has listened to echoes of that comment ever since she happened upon her unusual medium nearly a decade ago. Simply stated, what she is creating are three-dimensional wall reliefs made of folded, painted paper.

"There's no conceivable reason why I should be good at this," Newman said about the origami-like technique she uses. "I'm the worst Lego builder in the world, and at home I get laughed at any time I try to do anything associated with building.

"But I can do this one thing, and I don't know why. I first discovered it when I was teaching a summer art program to gifted middle-school students.

"The assignment was to make a three-dimensional relief by folding and scoring paper. I did one as a problem-solving thing in order to be able to teach the kids. The more I did it, the more I started to see it as a way to really express emotions."

Newman said she was at loose ends with her artwork at the time, so she continued to explore the new avenue of creativity. While developing her skills, she happened upon a wellspring of inspiration.

As a tribute to the Impressionist painters she has admired since her youth, the artist decided to create interpretations of some of their finest masterpieces.

"I grew up in Chicago, where they have one of the best Impressionist collections in the world," said Newman, who lives with her husband, Bill Lapham, and their 8-year-old son near Schuyler.

"My dad would take me to places like the Art Institute of Chicago, and I really got to know the famous Impressionist painters and their works. When I discovered this medium, it gave me an excuse to start exploring their work further by doing interpretations of some of the more famous paintings.

"It's almost like a jazz musician might take a familiar tune and then do something with it out of his own inspiration."

Long-time admirer

Ann Angle long has been an admirer of Gustave Caillebotte's painting "Paris, a Rainy Day." When she saw Newman's rendition at a local art show this past spring she literally gasped.

"When I walked in the door of the gallery, it was hanging straight ahead," Angle said. "My first words were, 'Oh my, look at that.'

"I walked up to it and stood there taking in the three-dimensional aspect of it. I usually like to think awhile before buying a piece of art, but I bought Stefanie's work on the spot."

Angle generously loaned the work to Les Yeux du Monde for Newman's exhibit, which will be up through Saturday. When the relief was hanging in Angle's home, her best friend, Suzanne Cooper, was so taken by it that she commissioned Newman to do one for her. The artist accepts commissions through the gallery.

"Suzanne is a horse person, so Stefanie did Edgar Degas' 'At the Races in the Country' for her," said Angle, who has a strong background in the arts. "When she saw it for the first time, she couldn't have been more thrilled.

"I think Stefanie has hit on a great idea of taking familiar Impressionist paintings and reworking them in a very creative way. The coat on the gentleman in the work I have comes right out at you, and I love that.

"She isn't doing true-to-life exact replications of these works. She is expressing other ideas of her own in them, and I like

that very much as well."

The golden age of the great Impressionist painters such as Degas, Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir was from about 1870 to 1910. This was a time of great change, and it influenced the artists.

"This was where modernity starts," Newman said, referring to the final quarter of the 19th century. "People were moving into Paris from the countryside, so you have all these people who are like fish out of water.

"A lot of the subjects of Degas and Monet speak of this sense of isolation. I lived in Chicago and New York, and I feel akin to that. Caillebotte's 'Paris, A Rainy Day,' is actually a painting of a new part of Paris where five streets meet.

"They took out all these little alleyways and made this new part of the city. A lot of people hated it. Even though we now look at this painting with a kind of nostalgia, today, it would be like me going out and painting a picture of Wal-Mart, because I wanted to do something modern."

Lyn Bolen Warren, owner of Les Yeux du Monde Gallery, has followed and admired Newman's work for years. Warren was working on her doctorate at the University of Virginia under Picasso scholar Lydia Gasman when she became aware of Newman's talents.

Newman taught in the studio art department at UVa from 1985 to 1992. She then worked with her husband in his restoration and decorative painting business. One of their major projects was the restoration of the ornate Victorian ceiling in Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Staunton.

"When Stefanie was teaching at UVa, she painted wonderful, large-scale expressionist abstract paintings," Warren said. "I later exhibited her work at my gallery when it was located on West Main Street.

"These works were also large, mysterious semi-abstract paintings with collaged architectural elements. So these relief sculptures based on famous paintings at first seemed totally different from what she had been doing, and very daring."

Warren said by highlighting specific parts of the original paintings in three dimensions, Newman manages to breathe new life into famous works that are included in the lexicon of art history.

"She makes one look at the original paintings from which she departed, and also at our own time in relation to the one she is portraying in the reliefs," Warren said.

"They are very interesting reinterpretations of art and history. The fact that they literally share the same space with the viewer is another part of their appeal and immediacy."

Gasman, associate professor emeritus at UVa, also has followed Newman's career for years. She holds the artist's work in high regard.

"Picasso said sculptures show what paintings lack - mainly space," Gasman said. "Stefanie achieves this with her insight and instinct.

"There is a wonderful combination of traditional, contemporary and post-modern [elements] in her work, which is, philosophically speaking, a very intelligent idea. Taking these known masterpieces and giving them a modern twist is very striking."

Newman said she has been interested in creating art as far back as she can remember. In the first grade she drew a robin in a nest that had the distinction of being put up in the hall next to the principal's office.

On the other side of praise

That same school year, another piece of the young artist's growing oeuvre didn't get singled out for praise.

"We had to make little folded owls with beaks," Newman said. "My teacher held mine up as an example of what not to do. It happened again in the seventh grade when I took an origami class.

"The teacher held up something I had made and said, 'Kids, this is not what you should do.'

"But I've always been fascinated by art, and by how you can take a line and make it into a whole world.

"My grandfather [Maurice Hirsch] was very talented and made some money selling watercolors on the streets of Chicago. We would sit together and draw. He would draw a line and I would copy it on my paper.

"It would always become something manly, like a Colt revolver or an Indian chief. But it was the magic of watching that appear that I loved."

Newman said she doesn't think she has begun to touch the potential of what she'll be able to do in the medium that continues to intrigue her. Although people constantly tell her they've never seen work like she produces before, she

doesn't see herself as a pioneer in a new medium.

"I know there are people out there who do things similar to what I'm doing," said Newman, who did her graduate work at Bennington College in Vermont and postgraduate studies at St. Martin's College of Art in London and the University of Madison in Wisconsin.

"When I started doing this I didn't think about whether they were unique or not. I'm of a certain age where I don't think I'm going to be the person who is going to discover a whole new art medium and stand the art world on its head with some revolutionary approach.

"I just feel really fortunate that I ran into this medium, because the pieces are so much fun to do. It's just a mystery to me why I can do it."

Stefanie Newman's exhibit, "Reconstructing Art History," will be on display at Les Yeux du Monde Gallery through Saturday. The gallery is at 115 S. First St., just down from Charlottesville's Downtown Mall. 973-5566.