

FRIDAY, APRIL 5, 2002

Anne Connell: Recent Paintings and Jane Masters: Recent Drawings

At: Miller Block Gallery, 14 Newbury St., through April 23. 617-536-4650.

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Time travel

Anne Connell's paintings at the Miller Block Gallery are phantasms of art history, conflating early Renaissance with modernism. Connell revels in the illusion of depth of the Renaissance; she also likes to call our attention to its fiction by overlaying it with grids and fixing it in diptychs. Each of her paintings lures the viewer into a dream, then jostles the viewer awake. This back and forth deliberately confounds us. With the form shifting, it's hard to get a grasp on the content, but that uncertainty is precisely what the artist seeks to create.

"Wisdom and Ecstasy" fills the frame with a detail from "Choir of Virgins" by Giovanni da Milano; we see two figures from the waist down, one garbed in loose gray robes, the other in a snug, shimmering tangerine skirt. Connell has painted white pearls and red glass beads in a grid on the surface of the picture; she's even painted little shadows beneath them, so it looks as if she's festooned the painting with jewels. Even in betraying the illusionistic depth of the older painting, she invokes new illusionistic depth.

She can't seem to resist that illusion. In "A Young Lady of Fashion," she offers a trompe l'oeil painting of an envelope, seemingly tucked into the picture frame, with a postcard sticking out. The postcard, of which we see only a fraction, features Paolo Uccello's painting of the same name, which can be seen at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. The envelope sits against a pattern of plus signs and transparent cubes toppling over one another — again, ghosts of depth, dancing on a flat plane. Then Connell cuts a window in the plane and plants a line of trees beyond. For every assertion of illusion, there's an assertion of reality in these paintings — and never the

twain shall meet.

For something completely different, check out the back room at Miller Block. Jane Masters makes scratchboard drawings, gouging white lines out of a board coated with India ink. She scratches against a stencil, repeating in close succession into a snaking, Slinky-like pattern.

The fine-tuning of these works would cross the eyes of an ordinary person, but with it Masters creates shadows and highlights that make her forms pop off the boards they're scratched in. They're shocking in their vibrancy and stunning in their obsessive precision.