

Scenes from a Roman holiday

Cristi Rinklin's new exhibition turns walls and stained glass windows into colorful surprises

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | July 27, 2006

Painter Cristi Rinklin's smart, eye-popping canvases are known for their loop-de-loop approach to space and their candy colors. Her new mural installation, "Nuvolomondo," on the walls and in the windows of the Tufts University Art Gallery's Harry Remis Sculpture Court, lets the sun shine through, which takes the tones and the depth of her work even further.

The result is intoxicating: a spinning, jiving, back-flipping abstraction of simmering red-orange cloud formations dancing the tango with a loose-limbed ribbon of turquoise.

Rinklin is a painter's painter, but she has her feet squarely in the 21st century. The illusion of space fascinates her, and what it takes to build it. She does so by layering sources from Rococo art to decorative textiles and cosmological imagery. While she usually paints by hand, first she processes her material on the computer, prodding it, blurring it, and making it into something of her own.

"Nuvolomondo" follows Rinklin's stay in Rome as a visiting artist and scholar in residence at the American Academy, where she was inspired by Baroque ornament, architecture, and stained glass. The result is a brilliant, translucent world of clouds across the window panels of the sculpture court. They naturally coalesce into fantastic ribbed moldings and flourishing details, then poof back into red-edged cumulus formations.

She designed the window segments on the computer and printed them on clear panels, then added stenciled vinyl. The wall segments, which echo the window images but with flatter, simplified gestures, were hand-painted. Those gestures crawl like tendrils around the main event in the windows. There, images look at first purely organic, then reveal the surprising period references. Up close, a viewer feels cozily enveloped in the clouds. Step away, and you'll see that the mural in each block of windows isn't merely an atmospheric scene, but symmetric, kaleidoscopic, and intricately planned out.

Every time you turn around, "Nuvolomondo" offers up another surprise. This installation will grab even those who know nothing about painting, Roman architecture, or stained glass. It glows and rollicks; it washes over the viewer the way clean ocean waves roll onto the beach.