At this year’s Tufts show, less is more

By Cate McQuaid

The Tufts Annual Summer Exhibition highlights the work of artists who live in Somerville and Medford. It’s a great thing for the Tufts University Art Gallery’s ties to the community. But is it a great thing for the viewers? Large group shows with no set themes can be muddled. This year, organizers have pared the exhibition down to 11 artists; last year there were 25. While the show lacks cohesiveness, the art is mostly strong.

The first gallery offers the most effective juxtaposition. Kelvy Bird’s pulsing yellow abstract paintings, featuring an orb in the center of each large canvas, hang across from a series of small, precise, compellingly human portraits by Jeffrey Elise. Bird’s works look like a throwback to 1960s, cosmic and godlike. Elise’s make a humble human point.

Chris Nau draws by cutting in to the wall; his smart, large, abstract “Inhabitat XIII” breaks up the picture plane with the force of an earthquake. His work hangs near Nena Hersh’s layered, majestic cloud drawings.

Maria Muller makes photographic mirror images of architectural facades and landscapes, then hand-paints them. Their perfect symmetry and saturated tones suggest a sensual, illustrous world from which there is no escape. Gabrielle Rossner’s small figurative sculptures are sweetly mundane. Like Elise’s portraits, each brims with quiet personality.

Betty Bolivar works with text; she chooses a phrase, then writes it repeatedly to make a drawing, and most of her works are postcard-size and intimate. That’s why it’s a surprise to see Bolivar’s wall drawing “Is Only Matters II,” which must be 4 feet high. The words of the title drip and run around a circle filled with Arabic text, rushing but regular. The words read, strikingly, two ways as a mantra and as denial.

In her mixed-media works, Aparna Agnawal paints squirming pods and cocoons over dictionary text. She portrays the struggle of growth, and the text is an intriguing ground, like the soil from which a biological process springs. In Larabee’sencased collages she made out of tiny bits of folded leaves they’re all about tone.

Mary Kenny’s animated film is a delight to look at, but their gestator-and-creepy themes are too pet. Painter Denise Malis, an expensive therapist, makes paint-ings that plumb her unconscious. This can lead to works that are too precious in their mysteriousness. The best bring an artistic intelli-gence to synopym dream sequences. The rest are the bestest works in a show of often very good art.

Not-so-crazy quilts

Tom Fruin wanders the streets of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, picking up discarded baggies that once held drugs. He also grabs any other drug ephemera he can find. He takes them home, then tapes them and sews them together with a rickrack stitch into quilts. His work, which could make a narco-sniffing dog back, is on view at Judy Ann Goldman Fine Art.

The quilts are strangely beautiful, with a familiar homespun sweetness that’s unnerving once you find out what the material is. The colored, patterned, and clear bags are arranged to map out the specific city blocks where Fruin found them. He’s cleverly conflating two kinds of comfort — that of the cozy quilt and the more dangerous comfort of heroin or crack.

Is art born in the artist’s eye or in her hand? Sheila Gallagher’s frenetic drawings of female athletes question the importance of the artist’s hand in making work. She went to the Eye Tracking Lab at Boston College and looked at photos of athletics; a computer charted her eye movements. Each drawing is made of one unbroken line, stuttering back and forth and occasionally swirling out to the side. Even most computer-made art requires typing or mouse manipulation. This fascinating examination of perception questions a principle of art making that many hold sacred.

Floral reinterpretations

Victoria Munroe Fine Art has an ingenious pairing of botanical artists. William Booth Grey was a 19th-century British naturalist who documented flowers by making intricate collages. He’d cut stamen, petal, and leaf out of thin paper, then paint them and assemble them on a sheet coated with black ink. These are more accurate than they are beautiful, but that’s what makes them so fine. “Rudbeckia Purpurea,” a name for the purple coneflower, shows vibrant petals sitting away from the upthrust stamen.

Contemporary artist Suzanne Bocanegra uses a similar technique. She’s not documenting flowers, she’s reinterpreting floral still-life paintings by Jan Brueghel the Elder. Like Grey, Bocanegra meticulously re-creates each petal in watercolor and gouache. She instills them on a wall, hanging from strips of linen. It’s a brilliant, sad piece. You can see by the tones that they match the paintings, but these look like somebody’s taken a needle to a festive display of party balloons. The sense of loss is intentional: Flowers are here and gone in days, and a painting can never live up to the real thing.