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## POINTS OF DEPARTURE

*Jean Stern's Classic Oils And Cynthia Miller's Merry Mixed-Media Paintings Celebrate The Homecoming Of Two Long-Time Tucsonans.*

By Margaret Regan

A **NEW PAINTER** on the Tucson scene turns out to have been one of the first ones here. What with her one-woman show now in the Davis Dominguez alcove, people have been wondering just who this Jean Stern is. It turns out she's got long roots in Tucson. Stern lists on her résumé the fun fact that she was the first to get a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Arizona, back in 1962.

The young painter was involved to some degree with the artist colony of Rancho Linda Vista in its early years, says gallery co-owner Candice Davis, after which she decamped to New York for decades. Back in Tucson for several years, Stern has been easing her way into the local arts limelight, showing a tiny work at Davis Dominguez last summer in a group show, and exhibiting at the Rancho Linda Vista Gallery. With the new show--a collection of 14 sun-saturated oils on canvas and three vigorous drawings--she makes a full-throttle announcement of her return.

### REVIEW

Painted thinly, with deliberately flattened-out perspectives and simplified shapes, Stern's works suggest ambiguous human dramas. Her naked humans act out their playlets of mourning and longing either in claustrophobic urban spaces or unnaturally empty expanses of the natural world. Sometimes the places are one and the same, as rocks and cliffs mutate into the walls of buildings, and vice versa. There's a stillness and solidity to her figures, which come across as timeless human archetypes: the lover, the mourner, the child.

And indeed Stern draws freely on myth. In the compelling "Pan Pipes," some women solemnly watch a young Pan playing his music. The dignified gathering seems to be taking place on a Renaissance street, simplified into a cluster of rectangular volumes punctured by arched doorways.

The Bible's myths also provide inspiration. Stern has painted two different versions of Susannah, the beautiful young woman discovered in her bath by lustful male elders. "Susannah No. 1" emphasizes the woman's vulnerability. Bathing in the open air, under a pale blue sky, an anxious Susannah towers over her tiny peeping Toms. Her great size makes her not more powerful but more visible, and more unsafe. But "Susannah and the Elders" is unabashedly erotic. Here she is bent in the curve of sleep, and like a hot-house flower her naked flesh glows apricot against a bright blue sky. The elders are reduced to near-abstractions, mere shapes in red or teal.



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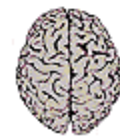
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Stern's unusual palette tends toward the cool and jewel-like, clear reds, teals and blues standing against pinky flesh and whitened skies. They're arranged in flat modernist compositions whose abstracted shapes are as important as the unsettling narratives. Most of the time, as in "Cortege," a stately red-and-black evocation of a funeral procession, the painterly effects seamlessly reinforce the narrative. Once in a while, though, the odd shapes get a bit intrusive, as in "Departure 1," where an unwieldy field of teal distracts from the psychological drama of lovers about to separate.

Artist Cynthia Miller, showing paintings and prints in a three-person show at Etherton, is another old Tucson hand, whose familiar *Domestica* paintings give consecrated life to prized domestic objects. Like Stern, Miller also holds an MFA from the UA and is a founder of a local arts institution, in her case Dinnerware Artists Cooperative. And like Stern, she's had some departures to deal with in recent years, as she moved with her family from Tucson to Minnesota for several years and then returned once more to town. That sense of being on the move--and of disruption--is reflected in her *Walking Houses* series.

These animated houses are just this side of kitsch, and they've sprouted arms and legs made for walking. "Moving West House" has turned cowgirl, striding in red boots across a desert, into the purple big skies of the West. This affectionate homage to western cliché is actually a "painted relief print," in which the artist paints on corrugated cardboard, that ubiquitous packing material, and presses the image onto paper. The corrugated lines show up on the print, distinct memories, even in this happy scene, of the horrors of packing and moving.

"House Hunting in Arizona" dwells on the house as metaphor for family. Its old-fashioned family of four--dad in top hat, mom and the girls in long dresses--reaches hopefully for a house thoughtfully equipped with a grab handle and a fun zebra on top. Similarly, the old-fashioned "Wedding Couple," a diptych framed in two pieces, is reminiscent of a naïve folk art painting depicting a generic married couple. Playful though they be, these pieces are nevertheless heart-felt celebrations of kith and kin, home and hearth, in a mobile culture that regularly tears family from community.

Miller's popular *Domestica* works, lively mixed-media paintings on paper, are full of the artist's trademark flying birds and undulating flowers. She venerates the handmade object here, endowing her traditional Southwestern cupboards and painted Mexican children's chairs with meaning greater than themselves. In "His Green Chair/Restored to Place," the little wood and straw chair has images of white reindeer painted against forest green, a nod perhaps to Miller's northern sojourn. Half-spirals, this time blue-green, dance across a tan background like things half-alive. A blue sky and white moon break in at the top: harbingers of a return to place?

By contrast to Stern's classic oils, Miller's technique is as merry as her imagery. Cheerful strokes of pastel and dabs of shiny gold vibrate against saturated paint sitting right on top of the paper. And where Stern's compositions look carefully planned, Miller's look like happy accidents. All of which goes to prove that,

contrary to reports, you can go home again.

**Jean Stern's** paintings are on view through Saturday, May 15, at **Davis Dominguez Gallery**,

154 E. Sixth St. Also on exhibition are David Pennington's collages and a collection of works by gallery artists. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday. For more information, call **629-9759**.

Paintings and prints by **Cynthia Miller**, along with recent photographs by **Frances Murray** and bronze sculpture by **Julia Andres**, are on display through Saturday, May 29, at **Etherton Gallery**,

135 S. Sixth Ave. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, with extended hours until 7 p.m. on Thursdays. For more information, call **624-7370**.

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