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'Oracle Bones,' painting by Debbie Ma of Calverton.



'Four Manilas' by Ellen Wiener of Southold.

## A mixture of messages

Group show at Riverhead gallery explores connections among veteran artists' work

BY JOYCE BECKENSTEIN | CONTRIBUTOR

Mention Art Sites to artists, collectors and critics who know the Riverhead gallery and they'll likely say, "Glynis — she has some eye." They're talking about Art Sites director Glynis Berry. The current group show, featuring four well-known veteran artists — Debbie Ma, Mel Pekarsky, Marianne Weil and Ellen Wiener — eloquently reflects her skill at finding artists with something to say and arranging their works in ways that say still more.

A practicing architect in partnership with her husband, Hideaki Ariizumi, who helps her run the gallery, Ms. Berry spots unique, often quirky, talent that she exhibits with an architect's flair for form and space. Rather than taking familiar shortcuts by assigning broad themes to connect the works featured in group shows, she instead seeks more variegated threads that relate works by one artist to those of another.

About the current exhibition, which has been extended through Nov. 13, she says, "It brings together works by accomplished, mature artists who are comfortable with their medium. I wanted to explore how each of them expands and finds new forms for what they do."

To eliminate the possibility that strong works

by strong artists would fight one another on the walls, Ms. Berry chose art with muted palettes. The various works she selected, linked together through neutral tones of black, white, gray and soft amber, all bow to the dramatic subtleties of texture and line. Ms. Berry's quiet choices allow Debbie Ma's vigorous paintings to court Marianne Weil's elegant new sculptures.

Ms. Ma, of Calverton, is an accomplished graphic artist who designs the packaging for well-known cosmetic companies and began her parallel fine art career 10 years ago. Her graphic background taught her how signs and symbols convey a powerful message, her study of Chinese calligraphy how they cast mystical spells.

"Ancient writing was the earliest form of abstract art," she said. "Each Chinese letter is open to interpretation — the sign for water can be three squiggly lines that suggest rain or tap water ... so many meanings."

She is simultaneously alluding to pictographs of her own devising, such as those in "Oracle Bones," a work densely textured with marble dust and layers of gray, black and white pigment incised with pictograms that suggest undecipherable graffiti on ancient peeling walls.

Ms. Ma's paintings are soul mates to Marianne Weil's sculpture, which also reinvents the signs



'Bullseye,' glass, copper and bronze sculpture by Marianne Weil of Orient.



'High Sierras,' a 'pencil painting' by Mel Pekarsky of Stony Brook.

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## GROUP SHOW...

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and symbols of antiquity. Ms. Weil, of Orient, is assistant professor of art at CUNY College of Staten Island. She has for many years exhibited her work at Art Sites and Kouros Gallery in New York City. This year she was the United States representative to the 2011 International Sculpture Symposium in Frostrup, Denmark.

The Neolithic cairns, steles and slabs she studied in Brittany and Spain inspired Ms. Weil's early bronze figures. Now she has extracted the spirals, grids and punctured outlined shapes embedded in those haunting pieces and placed them in organically shaped vessels of golden-hued blown glass. "Bullseye," for example, holds a piece of industrial copper bent into a spiral, a primordial symbol of nature and a repeated motif in Ms. Weil's sculpture. Here the human-made detritus of contemporary life is effectively suspended like an embryo in light, much as amber seals prehistoric remains. The viewer's reflection in glass completes the metaphor.

The Weil sculpture and Ma paintings share primal histories through abstraction. But they also resonate with the literal stories and representational styles common to the art of Mel Pekarosky and Ellen Wiener. And as Ms. Berry said, "These works are also linked by the artists' use of line."

Mel Pekarosky of Stony Brook, former chair of the art department at SUNY/Stony Brook, evolved from a figurative painter to one involved with environmental issues. He designed the first Earth Day poster in 1968, and then went into the desert with army accommodations at Fort Hood, Texas.

"Elvis was there and so were snakes," he quipped. "I found the desert to be symbolic of all that is precarious. ... The desert has strong enough icons to make people think about the earth."

Mr. Pekarosky has traversed American deserts from high country to the badlands of the Anza Borrego Desert in Southern California. His

"pencil painting" perspectives were drawn from airplanes, horseback and ground level. "High Sierras" is a sparse rendering of naked desert punctuated by thirsty sticks of brush conveyed through delicate but nervous lines. In contrast, "High Desert," a broad expanse of receding planes stretching toward distant mountains, is so intricately rendered that it reads as pure abstraction when you stand up close to it.

Ms. Berry set aside a separate gallery space as an intimate reading room for works by Southold artist Ellen Wiener. Here one finds a scroll-format painting, limited-edition prints of the artist's original accordion books and paintings on manila envelopes. Ms. Wiener, who taught at Princeton University and Dartmouth College, is renowned for her artist books inspired by medieval illuminated manuscripts. Her works are in numerous national libraries and in the Arts of the Book Collection at Yale University Library.

Though Ms. Wiener's paintings and folding books are representational, they have no fixed narratives. They are "about" the passage of time and reading them requires the viewer to take time perusing them. Unrushed.

"Numinous Woods" unfurls like an epic poem about monuments — astronomy domes, grave decorations, the tower of Babel, crumbling medieval ruins, skyscrapers. Using a complex process that involves drawing, print transfers and oil painting, the work deals with nostalgia for times past and for the book as a container of memories.

"Four Manilas" uses manila envelopes — a new canvas for Ms. Wiener, who drew across them a sheet of yellow legal paper scribbled with images of crumbling ruins, a reminder that in a digital age of "you've got mail," you no longer have the kind of mail that affords the tactile pleasures of opening an old-fashioned envelope.

Glass, ancient scrolls, imaginary calligraphy, desert drawings, books, paintings, sculpture, representational art, abstraction and narratives without stories. How do they all work together?

It's Glynis. She has some eye.

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