

Painter, photographer shroud their Northwest landscapes in mists of memory, mood

By Michael Upchurch
Seattle Times arts writer

Painter Tracy Rocca and photographer Christopher Harris put a deliberately hazy spin on Pacific Northwest landscapes in their new shows.

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You might call it “neoimpressionism.” Two gallery shows featuring work by painter Tracy Rocca, at Winston Wächter Fine Art, and photographer Christopher Harris, at Lisa Harris Gallery, converge on similar aesthetic territory approached from strikingly different angles.



"Waterfront" Tracy Rocca, Oil on polyester over panel, 2010; Photography by: Brad Walton

Rocca's paintings in "Wish You Were Here" draw on Seattle-area memories masked in a haze. Each one depicts a scene that can be recalled, yet not quite retrieved. Rocca, who grew up partly in the Pacific Northwest, lives in New

Mexico now, but it seems our land- and waterscapes still have a grip on her. These meditations on place — the University of Washington campus, the Seattle waterfront, the Sammamish River — pulse with a keen visual yearning. Take “The Quad,” a 60-by-60-inch oil on polyester over panel. It’s a vivid rendering of a campus stroll, even if all the detail remains out of reach. Hints of redbrick buildings frame a green lawn that’s partly in sun, partly in shadow. Above, blue sky is suffused in a whitening mist. The sheen of the glazes creates an almost reflective surface that deliberately won’t let you gain a firm purchase on the painting. Some of its companion pieces — “Edgewater,” the oddly spelled “Lili Pad” “Andover” (inspired, the artist says, by family visits in West Seattle) — would read as abstract if it weren’t for their titles, which let you discern something figurative in them. In others, recognizable shapes soon emerge: our local volcano in “Rainier” and the Space Needle and Belltown high-rises in “Waterfront” which, on closer perusal, proves to be a view from the car deck of a Washington state ferry. (In the lower right-hand corner, you can make out a car that may have its headlights on.)

“Spalding Trail,” even though it verges on abstraction, reveals Rocca’s extraordinary sensitivity to the content that color alone can convey. It captures, unmistakably, a forest light: bright on the path, tree-shadowed on the fringes. In a similar way, “Back of the Boat” (the only oil-on-muslin piece in the show) is clearly a vision of Puget Sound: white sun in broad water-reflection filling the center of the canvas, while dim, distant bluffs frame the scene with a floating-world fragility. Rocca’s seamless transitions between colors and her knack for barely hinting at something figurative in a wash of hues testify to her exacting technique and control.

It may seem odd to compare photographs to paintings that are so deliberately non-photographic. But Christopher Harris’ “Skagit Series” — long exposures shot at twilight with a digital Nikon camera through a pinhole lens — evokes a similar sense of landscapes slipping into eiderdown softness. The difference is that Harris’ subjects are right in front of him, while Rocca’s are in her mind’s eye. The first impression that “Beached Boat” gives is of a layering of colors from top to bottom: wan azure, dusky pink, slate gray, mist-pale blue, a brassy brown curve, a gritty black foundation. The title, of course, clarifies what you’re seeing. “Padilla Bay Cloud” is title-reliant, too. Otherwise, its discolored sun, breaking through a fissure of cloud, would read simply as an off-center brightness surrounded by a moody darkness.

In these and other photos Harris, like Rocca, cuts to the essence of what his landscapes offer him. Even in shots with more instantly identifiable subjects — “Winter Tree” or “Road’s End” — he brings out a ghostliness that has a potent effect.

Though they work in different media, both artists share an affinity in the

direction they're pushing Pacific Northwest art.