

In Living Black and White—with Shades of Gray: Colorless Expression Proves Lively in Second Street Gallery’s “She’s in Monochrome”



Laura Wooten’s “Alentejo” series (this is “Alentejo 5”) is now on view in the “She’s in Monochrome” show at Second Street Gallery. Image courtesy Second Street Gallery

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What do we really see when hues are subdued, diminished, or deleted outright?

Tough question. If you’re like me—colorblind—that’s kind of how you go through life. Art’s power when deprived of its full spectrum of possibility is difficult to gauge, since most of us who live the difference are simply born this way and have no basis of comparison. Yet in an interesting challenge, Second Street Gallery’s curator Kristen Chiacchia issued an invitation to local artists to create works that remove their usual reliance on color to express themselves. The resulting exhibition, “[She’s in Monochrome](#),” now occupying SSG’s Dové Gallery until October 25, is surprisingly rich and varied, despite the black, white, and gray rules strictly governing the works on display.

Gray Dodson (whose very name along with fellow artists Sam Gray and Pam Black makes it seem as if she were practically born for this type of show) doesn’t stray from her aesthetic inclination to focus skyward, a go-to subject of hers along with landscapes and images of water. Devoid of her usual soft color interplay, “Big Rain” and “Place of Unknowing” are downright monolithic, with protuberances of cloudbursts taking on an Old Testament lashing out on the land in the former, while muddled sunlight struggles behind the wet wisps of the trees in the latter. We’re entering an unreal setting that’s gloomy but not without a dim glimmer of promise at its heart.

Krista Townsend’s views of the land in “Glacier” and “Vermont Woods” offer a more clear-cut sense of form and shadow in nature. By taking what comes across as a nearly two-dimensional approach

while working within the confinement of greys, her work reveals a chilliness that is either a believable presentation of a steely-skied day or an icy night.

Providing an altogether different vision of landscapes, Laura Wooten's five numbered "Alentejo" pieces expose verdant hillsides robbed of their greens and browns, eliciting colder images of south central Portugal. There's something of Japanese *sumi-e* brush painting in her India ink and synthetic Yupo paper, as well; the stark pitch of the land loops and rolls, sliced by lightning bolt walking paths that catch the sun in cool forks, splaying the earth with serpentine pathways.



Nature nearly reaches its simulacrum breaking point in the grandmotherly floral patterns that have found a strange home in Lou Haney's works on fabric and aluminum. The absence of bright pastels or cheerful shades on the petals of "Black Velvet If You Please" and "Quilt Gilt" are unsettling even to the colorblind eye. The Lycra, cotton, and beadwork feels more *wrong* than perhaps it should, but that very space is where the profound difference between expectation and this monochromatic reality plays most heavily upon both our senses and ability to interpret without the usual crutches or cues.

Considering the constraints of the show, perhaps the most vivid works come from Sam Gray, who presents mythical plant people occupying sharp locales that shimmer with fantastically cartoonish, stylized graphic qualities. "Cosmic Seed" reveals a being emerging from its plant pod and floating to celestial heights via its free-flying roots. In "New Stories," the fungal woman ignores the jet goop dripping off her mushroom-capped head despite it getting everywhere—but with good reason, as she's deep in ritual. Smoldering flame alights her blackened left hand while she draws with her right: a beginning, the start of a circle on a page, in black and white.