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MFA'S SHOW OF `SCHOLARS' IS REWARDING FOR ALL

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The phrase "268th recipient of the Clarissa Bartlett Scholarship" carries a certain gravitas that Todd J. Elliott's work seems eager to dodge. Elliott's sleek paintings - inspired by racing cars and made of vacuum-formed plastics finished with a high-gloss acrylic urethane - have rounded edges and lean to the right, as if in a hurry to zoom away, Road Runner style.

The Bartlett prize Elliott has won is one of the Traveling Scholarships the School of the Museum of Fine Arts has given out since 1899. The school awards a total of \$80,000 to \$100,000 annually to a select few of its alumni and graduate students - nine out of 200 applicants this time around. Their work is now installed in the MFA's Foster Gallery. The original idea behind the scholarships was that artists would use the grants to go to Europe's capitals of high art, to polish their own work by studying the Old Masters. Nowadays, the winners travel world wide, and Western European masters are hardly the only role models.

Elliott, for instance, went to the Midwest to brush up on car culture.

Yet in writing about his work in the show's brochure, Elliott compares the high-gloss, high-tech top coat he gives his works to the varnishing that was once the final touch on oil paintings. The artists in this show have learned from their predecessors, which is appropriate for prizes a school awards. Their accumulated knowledge accounts for the rigor and craft in their work. However diverse in subject and style, for the most part the works in Foster are well made and well thought-through.

The most traditional looking work is Nuno de Campos's series of small paintings in egg tempera on panel, a venerable technique. Each of the seven works focuses on the lap of a woman clad in a blue flower-bedecked dress. Since we don't see the rest of her, it's left to her arms to express her feelings. She conducts an entire monologue with them, going from anger to despair. In the Renaissance, these works would have been considered studies leading up to a painting of the full figure. In contemporary art, the fragmented figure is a genre all its own.

Adrian Carroll also works with fragments, taken from his sketchbook of subjects real and imaginary. He arranges them in paintings, without providing any narrative connection among them or any hint of context. What is the reason that rubber ducky is floating in the same big void with a leather chair and a piece of fruit? Carroll lets you concoct an answer.

Heidi L. Johnson's paintings of flora and fauna are as congested as Carroll's paintings are spare. She confesses, in the brochure, to her "desire to make pictures about

everything at once," an unreach able end she tackles through piling up colorful layers of butterfly flies, flowers, turtles, and birds held together by ethereal webs. The packed imagery spreads evenly over the entire canvas, with no focal point. (The title of one work, "Shelf pa per," refers playfully to the all-over design.)

On the installation front, Julio Cesar Roman's "Bodies of Desire" is a narcissistic celebration of his own sexuality, based on the nude male body drawn and photographed exquisitely, both life-size and in peep-show format. Terence Hammonds's "A B-Boy's Breakdown" mixes traditional-looking ornate wallpaper, a glass case filled with gold-edged china, and hip-hop imagery. Curlicued European-style decorative arts meet raw urban culture. It's a kind of juxtaposition that has become a formula, and needs reworking if the idea behind it is to stay compelling. The same goes for Jerry Russo's large black-and-white Iris prints of gates, all closed and

forbidding: Documenting variations on an architectural theme is another formula that succeeds only when there's a new twist to keep it fresh.

The stripped-down works of Cree Bruins and Judy Kermis Blotnick are, for my money, Best of Show. Blotnick used to be a fashion designer. Her works are detailed ink drawings on blank white panels. Many of the subjects are clothes, but there are exceptions. "Well Connected" is the image of a Rolodex with lines connecting the pages to symbols of the information those pages contain. A high-heeled shoe, for instance, might signify a listing for a shoe store or a shoe-repair shop.

Blotnick's biggest work, "The Way We Live Now," is composed of dozens of little white rectangles clustered in a corner. Their imagery is clothes, closet organizers, collars and cuffs, hooks and eyes, and there are so many of them that they make contemporary Western clothing seem a laborious, unnecessarily complex affair. A row of identical suits could fill a mens wear store. But they're all the same size. They must come from one person's over stuffed closet. Blotnick's art is about excess and the insecurity of people who buy and own too much of the same thing. Perhaps the garment trade's endless focus on production and profit is what drove her to switch to art.

Manipulating the materials of photography has become an art in itself, thanks in part to two Museum School students of the '80s, Mike and Doug Starn. Bruins extends the idea in elegant installations of back lit, glowing film canisters; streams of film mounts and clips cascading from the ceiling; and negatives tossed on a light table, overlapping at odd angles. With their solid colored squares and black sprockets, they look like a Mondrian that's lost its ability to hit a right angle.

The artists will give two gallery talks about their work. Tomorrow at 11 a.m., Blotnick, Johnson, Elliott, and Roman will speak; on March 6, also at 11 a.m., Bruins, Carroll, Hammonds, and Russo will have their turn. Talks are free with admission. Meet at the MFA's Sharf Information Center. 617-369-3300.

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