

Flying Colors



"What About Our Nest? V," a painting/collage by Carol MacDonald.

BY MARC AWODEY

In classical mythology, the architect Daedalus constructed the Labyrinth of Crete to keep the Minotaur at bay. A two-dimensional representation of the Labyrinth, a convoluted swirl that looks almost like a maze, appeared on a Cretan coin in the first millennium B.C., and it has appeared in various guises in other cultures around the world ever since.

Colchester artist Carol MacDonald also uses the labyrinth in many of her works, currently exhibited at the Mist Grill in Waterbury, along with fresher personal iconography — ravens. Her use of these black birds is very different from the way Van Gogh and others in Western art have employed them. Like MacDonald's labyrinths, they are innocent rather than ominous, and appear to be spiritual symbols representing interconnections between people and their environment. Fortunately, most of the paintings and monoprints in this show also work well formally. All of the "mindfulness" in the world cannot redeem a poor composition.

"Five Birds Feeding" is excellently composed. The tall, narrow oil-on-canvas painting consists of five pecking black birds seen from above. They are dispersed asymmetrically up and down the image, and the background is an abstract space built of brushstrokes that imply MacDonald's labyrinth form without clearly delineating it. Her colors range from a dark green at the top of the canvas to descending strokes of ocher and pale carmine.

"Migrations I" is a large-scale painting that employs similar hues. Its fully rendered labyrinth symbol curls over a green field on the left of the painting, and again the ravens appear. Five of these birds are flying at the right, in an atmosphere of sienna and orange. Three more appear at the left, creating a clockwise motion in the small flock that balances and echoes the broad, round labyrinth beneath them.

MacDonald is an accomplished printmaker, and her monoprints are well-controlled without losing spontaneity. "Making Peace" and "Red Birds I" also have passages of drawing within the images. In "Making Peace," strands of gray pencil line break out of the rectangular boundaries of the print, adding a distinct layer of dimension over the two black birds. "Red Birds I" is chromatically

enlivened by areas of colored pencil.

A substantial oil-on-paper painting, "Two Birds Walking," moves horizontally across two sheets framed together. Its lucid, diagonal composition illustrates that simplicity is one of the key factors which makes this exhibit work. MacDonald has placed the two birds in a red field at the upper right and divided the rest of the space with a long slope from upper right to lower left. This sweeping diagonal does not run from corner to corner, however; MacDonald has pushed the line slightly off-balance. Her colors are equally effective, while also being kept to a minimum —

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olive green, and a pinkish brown below the slope, complement the red area where the birds reside.

"In the Landscape," a painting-within-a-painting, uses a more complex approach to color. A small landscape at the center of the canvas is surrounded by a thickly layered expanse of wax. The fat translucency of the wax has a completely different character than the delicate scene of purple mountains and rolling green and blue hues at the heart of the piece. The waxy area also has warmer colors within it, further separating the two. "In the Landscape" is unlike any other piece in the show. If it was an experiment, it was a successful one.

MacDonald's technical versatility, combined with her ability to keep the images simple and direct, make this a solid show. To preach without being overly preachy is also a refreshing talent. ⑦

"What About Our Nest?" paintings, prints and mixed-media works by Carol E.S. MacDonald. Mist Grill Gallery, Waterbury. Through October 15.