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ART • WEEKEND

Olivia Munroe's Art Goes Mystic

A funny thing happened to Munroe's works on their way to finding physical form.

Edward M. Gómez



Mixed-media works in Olivia Munroe's current solo exhibition, "Archetypes," in New York (photo courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

If secrets and uncertainties lurk in the shadows, do truths about what is real and knowable reveal themselves, inevitably, in the light? If, as Buddhist teachings advise, perceived "reality" is merely a fleeting confluence of energies in a moment of infinite time, then what is there that is ever convincingly in our grasp — to be clutched in the hand, held in the mind, or squirreled away

in that repository of spirits and memories that one might call the nurturing place — and refuge — of the soul?

For generations, artists have tried to wrap tangible form around such ruminations on the ineffable; in modern art, exercises in the material in the service of the unknowable have been mainstays of certain abstract-art makers for more than a century. Pure form might appear to be their subject, but often transcendence is their game.

It's in the spirit of all of these, well, spiritual themes that along comes the American artist [Olivia Munroe](#) with [Archetypes](#), an exhibition of new mixed-media "paintings," along with a selection of colorful drawings on paper, which is on view at Sundaram

Tagore Gallery in Chelsea through October 7. It is this somewhat reclusive artist's first solo presentation in the heart of the New York art scene in many years. (See the show's electronic catalogue, [here](#).)

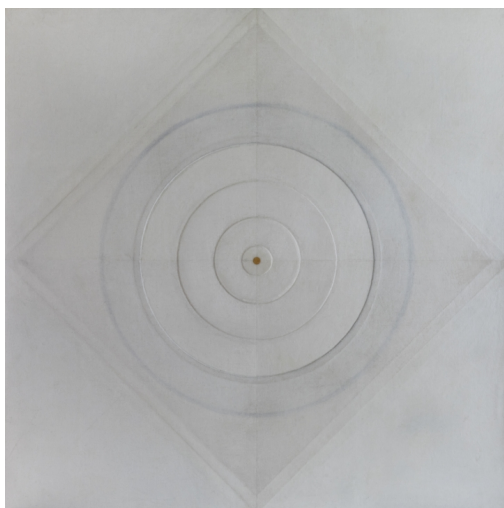


The artist Olivia Munroe with some of her new, mixed-media works at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

During a recent interview at the gallery, Munroe, who has long lived and worked in Connecticut, spoke about her background, art-making methods, and outlook. Her manner is down-to-earth and inviting, all unabashed vulnerability wrapped in eager inquisitiveness, including a good dollop of ongoing self-inspection. Among the legions of résumé-building, trend-chasing artist-careerists on the scene today, this kind of personal character — its basic component: humility — is refreshing. Munroe, who for many years taught children's art classes, is the kind of artist who could be as turned on by mud pies as she would be

Michelangelo's perspective drawings.

She admitted that she does not really keep up with the art world's critical debates or with its latest market fashions. Still, acknowledging postmodernist theory's pooh-poohing of — or outright disdain for — connoisseurship (the “fetishization of the object”) and the expressive touch of the art-maker's hand (the “critique of authorship”), Munroe told me, “I'm interested in beauty. Can I say that?”



Olivia Munroe, Untitled, 2016, cloth, beeswax, string, aluminum panel, 48 x 48 inches (photo courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

“I'm also interested in the sacred,” she added. “Not in any organized religion, per se, but rather in what is, you might say, something larger than our human selves. Our relationship with nature. An awareness of all of that in relation to what's spiritual *in* ourselves.” If that is the kind of fleeting subject matter Munroe has set out to depict or at least to allude to in her art, as her current exhibition subtly proposes, a funny thing happened in her works on their way to finding physical form.

That is to say, they became several different kinds of art at the same time; made of built-up layers of materials — fabric, beeswax, gesso, string, gold powder, and more — and mounted on wood or aluminum panels, they are not purely paintings but instead some kind of sculpture (Munroe is not sure if they should be called bas-reliefs or not), even as they deploy collage-making techniques. Thus, while they suggest a breaking-down of familiar genres, they also imitate their subjects' unlocatable, spirit-teasing nature as much as they strive to portray it. Do they do so by accident or by design?

In response to that question, Munroe, who was born in 1953 and is now the mother of adult children, suggested that the works on view in *Archetypes* represent the culmination of a long artistic journey. “Since I was little, I’ve been making art,” she recalled. “I’ve always loved experimenting with materials. If the results of exploring one kind of material or technique don’t serve my immediate purposes, I’ll remember what I’ve learned and bring it into some future project. In making art, I’ve found that accidents can become useful friends.”

Olivia’s mother, [Enid Munroe](#), who is now elderly and retired, was a painter. Her late father was a corporate executive whose company sent him to Mexico and Japan during Olivia’s childhood years, and the family traveled with him. Her three sisters are all accomplished figures in the cultural world. “I remember the colors, flavors, and aromas of Mexico,” Olivia told me, focusing, in particular, on her appreciation of traditional *papel picado* designs made of cut-out tissue paper. She recalled, “We would buy colorful sheets of tissue paper, and at home, with my scissors, I made collages.”



Olivia Munroe, untitled drawings from the “Histories” series, 2012-17, various media on antique paper, each piece 7.5 x 10 inches (photo courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

When her family lived in Japan, she said, “I guess I just absorbed the spirit of so many aspects of art and design that were in the environment — the look of glowing lanterns, the forms and textures of ceramic plates and bowls, the mood in a Buddhist temple’s garden. I’m sure that this aesthetic sense was passed on to me by my mother, who took us with her to look at churches or places I’ll

never forget, like the Bazar Sábado.” Munroe was referring to a popular outdoor market for art and handicrafts that takes place regularly in San Ángel, a district in the southern part of Mexico City.

Later, as an adult, after studying printmaking at the Maryland Institute College of Art and the Rhode Island School of Design, Munroe became increasingly interested in Buddhism and the ancient forms of art and architecture through which Buddhist thought has been conveyed.

Well into the early 1990s, she explained, she worked primarily as a printmaker. Her specialty: etchings. Then, she recalled, from around the mid-1990s, “I ended up taking what turned out to be a 15-year break from my own art-making while I brought up my children and taught art to kids. I loved the experience and I learned a lot from it, especially because, in preparing lessons for the children about ancient Egypt or other subjects, I learned a lot myself.”

Munroe observed, “A lot of what I’m doing now evolved right out of the experimenting with materials I first did in those classes with the children.”

The roots of her newest body of mixed-media works can also be traced to her production in the early 2000s of circles of clay, which she placed in antique boxes. Artistically, those concoctions went nowhere, as she recalls matter-of-factly, but they led her to begin tinkering with plaster and then with wax, and then eventually to dip lengths of fabric into melted wax. Once dried, those semi-solid fabric pieces could be handled and cut somewhat like thick paper. By meticulously cutting and carefully handling this simultaneously delicate and sturdy material, Munroe learned that she could build up layers of cut, waxed-fabric forms to create sculptural-relief surfaces.

“The new works feature up to ten layers of built-up, ‘drawn’ circles or other shapes,” she pointed out. In addition, Munroe covered these textured-surface “paintings” with a final, thin sheet of wax-dipped cloth, which serves as each piece’s translucent, protective skin. Like all those modernists before her for whom a fundamental visual language of lines, circles, squares, triangles, grids, and other “pure” geometric imagery had provided a launching pad for spiritual lift-off, Munroe felt that she had found a combination of technical methods and material forms that served her communicative purposes.

It might not come as a surprise that she admires the work of such image-making precisionists as Giotto, Fra Angelico, or Richard Diebenkorn, along with that of Mark Rothko, a fellow conjurer of emotionally, psychologically charged atmospheres. Many viewers may find in Munroe’s work the serenity that classical Buddhist art both embodies and conveys — as well as affinities with those spare, richly colored Tantric paintings from Rajasthan, in northwestern India, which in recent years have seized the attention of Western artists and collectors alike (thanks largely to the success of



Olivia Munroe, *Untitled*, 2016, cloth, beeswax, gesso, gold, paper board, rag mat board, 44 x 32 inches (photo courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

the contemporary French poet Franck André Jammé's book, *Tantra Song: Tantric Painting from Rajasthan*.

Such abstract images — a small triangle and a circle plunked down in empty pictorial space like lonely islands in a vast sea, or a block of bold, Daniel Burin-like stripes — serve as visual prompts for a seeker's deep, concentrated, spiritual contemplation. Similarly, the character of Munroe's art also brings to mind that of the pioneer in abstraction Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), a Swedish mystic whose paintings predated the non-realist, image-making experiments of such legendary early modernists as Wassily Kandinsky or Piet Mondrian.

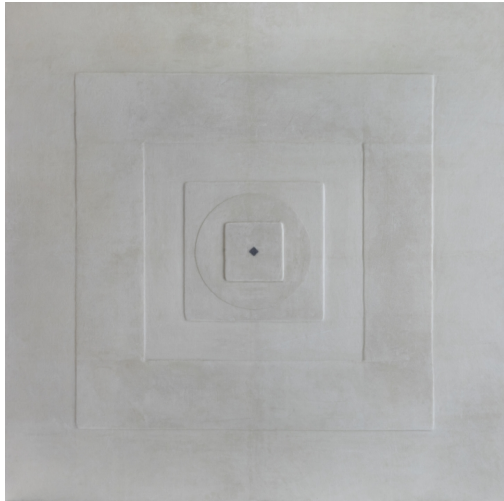


Olivia Munroe, *untitled drawings* from the "Histories" series, 2012-17, various media on antique paper, each piece 7.5 x 10 inches (photo courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

In the current exhibition, a selection of Munroe's "Histories" is also on display. These small-format, abstract drawings on paper can feel rather potent when seen individually, yet seem to gain in intensity when viewed together, in quantity. In *Archetypes*, several groupings of these small works are on view.

"I made them on some old, French-made paper another artist had given my mother decades ago, and that was later passed on to me," Munroe said. She explained, "They were big sheets, but since I wanted these drawings to feel more intimate and I wanted to make a lot of them, I cut them down to a smaller size." Of course, she added, she found a way to apply wax to these smaller sheets of paper, too. Over the

years that she has produced these drawings, with their symbol-like marks, dynamic squiggles, and random patterns, she noted, “I’ve used just about every kind of drawing tool or medium you can imagine.” Among them: India ink; markers with brush-shaped tips; vegetable dyes; gold-powder pigment; metallic-ink markers; rubber stamps; and illustrator’s markers.



Olivia Munroe, *Untitled*, 2017, cloth, beeswax, string, aluminum panel, 48 x 48 inches (photo courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

I asked Munroe to take stock, in her own way, of her newest works and to try to put her finger on the palpating energy field that appears to be their collective subject. She replied, “I’d say that this kind of work reaffirms that there’s something about the most basic geometric forms and materials that everyone can relate to, and whose nature is universal.” The artist took a sip of water and added, almost like a confessor, “For me, there’s something sacred in that.”

This inventive artist’s work salutes the unnamable through a combination of yearning for the sacred and teasing something out of the profane — paper, cloth, string, and all that milky, oddly luminous, skin-like wax. This is what Olivia Munroe is up to in her strangely present-and-elusive art of assertive, abiding immanence.

[Olivia Munroe: Archetypes](#) *continues at Sundaram Tagore Gallery (547 West 27th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 7, 2017.*