

ART PRACTICAL

5/Work(er)

Reflections: Small Scale Works/ Manifold

THEODORA VARNAY-JONES

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DON SOKER CONTEMPORARY/SJICA

by Lani Asher

*The True Artist Helps the World by
Revealing Mystic Truths* - Bruce
Nauman, 1967



“Manifold”, 2009; installation view, San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art. Courtesy of the Artist and SJICA.

Visually, Theodora Varnay Jones’ work places her squarely in the company of such artists as Agnes Martin, as she often relies upon line, grids, and fields of extremely subtle color. Although minimalist in form, her approach finds kindred spirit with the abstract expressionists. Preserving their handmade quality, she constructs small wall pieces and sculptures from layered sheets of paper or acrylic that become metaphorical skins of time and memory. Currently she has simultaneous shows on view in San Francisco and San Jose.

In “Reflections: Small Scale Works” at Don Soker Contemporary Art, her work solidly anchors a cavernous 10,000 square foot gallery space.

In the 1990s Varnay Jones spent some time as an artist-in-residence at Kyoto Seika University in Japan, and *wabi sabi*, a Japanese concept of beauty, infuse many of her pieces. *Wabi* connotes simplicity and understated elegance and *sabi* is beauty or serenity that comes with age, as evidenced in the patina and wear of an object. Varnay Jones’ works function as containers for memories. They combine traditional art materials with impermanent or found substances such as dirt, wax, metal filings, or rusty metal that transform over time. Some recent works, including *Tablet I, II, and III* (all 2009) contain layers of visually dense and hard-to-decipher writing sandwiched between sheets of translucent paper. *Large Stone # 1* and *#2*

(both 1996) are small ceramic sculptures that look like they were buried and subsequently unearthed.

In *Combray* (2005) she mounts a copy of the first volume of Marcel Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* or *In Search of Lost Time* on the wall, opened to a highlighted passage that compares the beauty of a pregnant servant to a painting by Giotto. *Combray* refers to Proust's name for the village Illiers and seems to also suggest Proust's statement: *Every reader finds himself. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument that makes it possible for the reader to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have seen in himself.* [1] The novel acts as a touchstone for Varnay Jones' concern with memory found in the concrete, physical realities of her materials and everyday life. It is a book that she has kept by her side since childhood.

Growing up in the intellectual climate of postwar Hungary, she was influenced by Beckett, Camus and Theater of the Absurd. Arriving in America in the 1970s, she followed this absurdist thread to the wit of visual artist Bruce Nauman, finding inspiration in his philosophical artistic propositions—such as casting the negative space under a chair—and pithy neon text pieces. “Manifold,” installed in a smaller and more intimate space at SJICA, includes a series titled *Indistinction* (2001-09), all of which refer to confusion or uncertainty; they utilize drawing, beeswax, mesh, acrylic polymer, gut, or fiberglass. Another sculpture

Ghost (2009) is a solid yet transparent structure made from plexiglass, acrylic, and mirrored plexiglass. Varnay Jones fabricated several sculptures from old test tubes and plastic multiples; in others, she cast shapes from a candleholder found in a thrift store.



Combray, 2005; pages from *Swann's Way*, acrylic polymer, and fiberglass mesh with wood structure; 8 X 11 1/4 X 7 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Don Soker Contemporary Art, San Francisco.

Several sculptures in the show seem to refer to architectural elements such as windows and doors while others seem to illustrate mathematical ideas. The term manifold describes a central concept to geometry and mathematical physics, in which the properties of simple shapes illustrate and clarify more complicated structures. Similarly, Varnay Jones approaches complex ideas such as memory, time, and poetic metaphor through uncomplicated and reductive forms.

Like geometry, Varnay Jones bases her investigations on observable data. In *Diary* (1998-99) she systematically burns small marks onto pages of paper with incense to indicate the passing of time. The pages are titled by the date; she may produce several or as few as one in a day. *Remanence* (2003) consists of 15 small works placed in a grid, and refers, according to Varnay Jones, to what remains after wet clay spread over wet paper dries and cracks. She seals the dried pieces, which vary in color according to



Remanence, 2003; clay, beeswax, paper and aluminum with wood structures; 41 X 72" X 11 1/2 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Don Soker Contemporary Art, San Francisco

Her pieces often resemble alchemical apparatus or experiments that distill opposing materials into a powerful elixir. The alchemists searched for the philosopher's stone a legendary substance supposedly capable of turning base metals into gold, and sometimes believed to be a source of immortality. The philosopher's stone in modern psychological terms is an allegory for the search for

the soul through opposing principles of dark and light, spiritual and material, or celestial and chthonic. Varnay Jones' work is a symbolic search for self, through the materiality of her art making.

"Reflections: Small Scale Works" is on view [Don Soker Contemporary Art](#) in San Francisco through December 30, 2009 and "Manifold" is on view at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art through February 20 2010.

[1] Proust, Marcel, from *Le Temps retrouvé* (*The Past Remembered*), Volume 7 of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, as cited at <http://www.ljhammond.com/proust.htm>

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