

## Symbolism shines in pastel still-lives



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G. Daniel Massad's "Ait," pastel on paper, can be seen at the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa.

TULSA — There is a distilled, deeply muted symbolism which transcends the exquisite refinement of technique — and almost the still-life genre itself — in a small show of pastel works on paper by G. Daniel Massad at the Philbrook Museum of Art.

First shown in March and early April at the Forum Gallery in New York City, the exhibit contains 10 pastel works on paper and one preliminary drawing by the 59-year-old Pennsylvania artist who was born and grew up in Oklahoma City.

Helping to make at least some of the works much more accessible are commentaries by Massad which are almost as concise and well-crafted as the works themselves and their handsome wooden frames (made especially for the artist).

Exemplifying the austere, subtle, symbolic content of Massad's works are two relatively large pastels de-

picting "Falls" of organic apples and a "Yield" of manmade ceramic bowls.

"When 'Falls' emerged in my mind's eye, I knew I had an image that hit the center of my own ambivalent reaction to (the) abundance (of nature) ... a horde of apples rolling toward the viewer through a break in a tilting stone wall," Massad writes.

In his commentary on the latter, he points out that the title is "a soberer synonym for harvest" and suggests "the way the front wall must have yielded to the pressure of the bowls."

Offering a good contrast to "Falls" is "Ara," a pastel of several gourds, arranged altarlike along the upper ledge of a large stone building block, above the circles of a half target and stain marks which offset the Piet Mondrian-like rectangularity of the overall composition.

"I've loved and hated Mondrian, but Mondrian's 'presence' in this picture is neither a celebration nor a critique," Massad writes. "It's there because ... I looked intently at and absorbed his work. It became a part of the soil ... of my imagination."

A pipe boundary marker, placed among some dry leaves and twigs, just behind a flagstone outcrop, suggests "The Way Through" one of the seemingly impenetrable black backgrounds which plays a crucial role in almost all of Massad's works.

Even more intriguing is a pastel in which a tall, vertical brick with a shattered top and another brick with the letters "ILE" on it, placed with a dry leaf, a bottle and other objects on a horizontal brick, becomes a metaphor for the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the "isle" of Manhattan.

Almost equally intense are two smaller pastels. One portrays three pieces of fruit in a rectangular niche, or "Reliquary," and the other, called "But I am Done with Apple Picking Now," depicts three apples in a confined, tightly cropped space.

Stone blocks, lit by "sharp, raking light," provide "the proscenium where the play unfolds," using "twigs, fruit, seedpods, bottles and simple bowls" as its characters, Christine Knop Kallengerger writes of Massad's "ledgescapes" in her catalogue essay.

Kallengerger, who introduced a slide-lecture by Massad on the show's opening weekend, is director of collections and public programs at Philbrook.

Painstaking in execution (and completed at the rate of only about three per year), but profound in their impact, at least on the attentive and attuned viewer, Massad's pastel works are highly recommended during his show's run through June 25.

— John Brandenburg