

# Cincinnati City Beat

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## Capturing Air

*Watercolorist takes a sculptural approach to her art*

**By Jane Durrell**

Does knowing how to weld help an artist paint watercolors? In the case of Diane Szczepaniak, possibly. She still considers her studies under the sculptor Michael Skop, of Fort Thomas, the defining element of her art and thinks in three dimensions even when working in two.

The title of her current exhibition, *In Pursuit of Form*, makes these concerns immediately apparent, and the paintings themselves are rich and glowing on the walls. They are intensively layered, with hints of submerged shades visible at the edges. The layers are extremely thin veils of color, together becoming a new entity.

Szczepaniak groups the works in this show as her "Dwellings" series, and indeed there is a sense of welcome sanctuary, of light coming from within, to most of the paintings. Her characteristic composition has a vertical and a horizontal band of more opaque color, often darker, that forms an L to anchor the work and keep it from floating as senselessly as a balloon. When the vertical is to the right, as in "Work No. 5" (2001), the L is turned backward. Sometimes the joint between the luminous area and the opaque almost quivers as they slide together, but it can be a sharp divide.

While not hung chronologically, paintings from two years ago are together in the smaller of the two galleries and more recent works in the larger. Ideas explored in some of the early works coalesce in the winter-pale blues and whites of "Work No. 6" (1999), and are expanded on in varying colors in more recent paintings.

One of the differences between the two groups is in dimensions; as the artist grew increasingly at home with her concepts the number of large paintings seems to increase. "Size," she says, "is part of the discovery you go through." The big pieces are all on Rives BFK paper, which comes in rolls 42 inches wide so either height or width of the finished work is approximately 42 inches. Smaller works are in so many different sizes that it's clear the painting itself determines its dimensions, not the original height and width of the paper. I particularly liked "Intimate Place No. 9" (2002), 14 inches high by 18.25 inches wide, its blues and purples mysteriously concealing reds beneath.

Szczepaniak works with a wide brush, sometimes as wide as a house painter's brush, and uses water generously to dilute her color into the thin washes that multiply within the work. As she layers, she "looks into the painting as if it were a sheet of glass. This lets me see where the piece started and where it's going." She likes to work on a particular piece over a long period of time, putting it aside and going back to it, noting changes from different times of day and even different seasons of the year.

Szczepaniak had already turned from sculpture to painting before leaving Cincinnati, and as a resident of the Washington, D.C., area has been included in a number of East Coast exhibitions.

"I want to capture air and make it real," Szczepaniak tells a group of art students during a gallery talk. Air? Captured? Isn't she talking about the "negative space" sculptors are so fond of? The part in between the actual thrusts of stone or metal? I think so. She's absolutely right; in any medium, her concerns remain sculptural.

Although Szczepaniak considers the space left untouched around the painting more important as a frame than the frame itself, each of these works is handsomely surrounded by unobtrusive steel strips, fashioned by the artist. I told you she knows how to weld.

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**IN PURSUIT OF FORM is on view at Xavier University through Nov. 22. (The Xavier University Art Gallery is located in the Cohen Center Art Gallery at 1658 Herald Ave. To find it, take Ledgewood north off Dana, turn east on Herald, and left into the parking lot, following signs to the A. B. Cohen Center, which is hidden by a rising parking lot.)**

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