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ART REVIEW

Sarah Braman presents thresholds and launching pads

By Cate McQuaid

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“Forward Blue” and “Door”

Maud Morgan would have smiled upon the selection of Sarah Braman as this year’s winner of the Maud Morgan Prize, the \$10,000 award given every other year to a Massachusetts-based woman artist by the Museum of Fine Arts. Braman’s small solo show, “Sarah Braman: Alive,” is now on view in the museum’s Eunice and Julian Cohen Galleria.

Morgan, a pungent colorist, saw her rising painting career squelched when she followed her husband, artist Patrick Morgan, to a teaching job in Andover. As a woman artist outside of New York in the 1940s, she didn’t have a fighting chance. She died in 1999 at 96. She actively made art to the end.

Like Morgan, Braman's art springs to life with a delicate musicality of hue. Unlike Morgan, Braman has been able to pursue a domestic life, raising a family in Amherst, at the same time she has cultivated a career. Recently, she garnered attention for paintings she made on sections of an old camper, abstractions that stirred up yearning for the gauzy twilights of the open road.

She has only one painting in "Sarah Braman: Alive," along with a video and two sculptures. The video, her first, "Planet Earth," quilts together scenes from her life — a son's homework on the kitchen table, an alert bunny on a path, a toddler running through wildflowers wearing only boots. The images comfort, but the larger idea, of life's tenderness and passage, feels pat. The video reads better as source material for her more abstract works, such as the painting, "Baltimore Summer."

It's a gorgeous thing, made with acrylic and spray paint on conjoined chunks of rough plywood. The colors recall overripe fruit, bruised but still sun-warmed and tangy. One edge of wood hints at a horizon line, throwing the array of breathy lozenges and swoops of color into the framework of a landscape. The wood, naked in places, violently gouged in others, has the feeling of exposed skin. Braman orchestrates color and texture to conjure person or place — wounding, or the soft opening of a dusky sky.

Boxy forms made from colored glass, the sculptures look comparatively simple, but they offer luminous viewing. I was there on a dreary day, when there wasn't much sun to play within them, but I still found the colors rapturous. "Door," an upright rectangle, and "Forward Blue," a 3-D parallelogram, sport faces of subtly changing hues.

Circle them, and the planes of glass play against one another. They're reflective and transparent. Their sculptural heft seems secondary to their dance with light and the illusion of ethereality prompted by the colored glass. Take a James Turrell light installation and condense it into an object, and you've got a Braman sculpture.

The false doors in ancient Egyptian tombs inspired “Door.” These stone carvings depicted entryways, right down to the jambs and lintels. The bereaved would leave offerings there, and it was thought the dead might come to meet them.

Braman frames this threshold between the living and the dead with planes of glass in reddish orange and purple. The more transparent faces invite you to step through; more reflective ones push you away. It stands, quite properly, beneath Tara Donovan’s untitled, burgeoning cloud made of plastic foam drinking cups. Both might be passageways to other worlds.

While “Door” reaches back to ancient Egypt, Braman’s sculptures have more direct kinship with minimalist art, such as Tony Smith’s lean, forceful geometries and Peter Alexander’s crisp resin sculptures. “Forward Blue” echoes the lines of a rhomboid Smith bronze in the museum’s collection, “For V.T.” I’d like to see them side by side — blue glass and blackened bronze, transparent and opaque, one a vessel of light, the other stubbornly solid.

Smith’s form has more propulsion than Braman’s. It thrusts, where “Forward Blue” tilts, a little more hesitant. Its royal blue, dusty mauve, and purple faces together create within it the deep, light-infused blue that briefly ignites the sky just after sunset; twilight is another threshold that this artist returns to again and again.



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Stand at the side that leans away from you, and you feel you might step in and launch forward. Look down. Liquid and deep, the mirrored floor catches all the sculpture's tones, plus the light grid of blinds arching in the vaulted window above, and the starlight sparkle of ceiling lights. Curiously, stand on the opposite side, as it leans toward you, the object has none of that magic. It feels like a humble, inquisitive thing, seeking knowledge from you, rather than the other way around.

“Sarah Braman: Alive” works wonderfully in its small space, interacting with the architecture, the light, and the surrounding art. But it did leave me hungering for a larger Braman show. More paintings. More sculpture. More launching pads into the unknown.

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