

Art



No show

If you want to see Dallas artist

Lynn Rushton's work, you'll

have to go to Austin

BY ANNABELLE MASSEY HELBER

If you wandered into the **Quadrangle** last week, you got there just in time to see them taking down Lynn **Noelle Rushton's** color-charged, wax-and-oil paintings from her one-week, one-woman show, which had been tucked into a vacant retail space in the southwest corner of the shopping center's interior courtyard. But what exactly would attract you to the place that's quickly becoming **Artown's** ghost town? Now that Legacy is one, only Theatre 3 and the savory "cheap lunch" at Dream Cafe make the Quadrangle any kind of Dallas destination. Lately, if you shout in the spacious courtyard, no one will point and smirk at your bad behavior, because no one's there to notice or call you in. Your voice simply echoes past the fountains and off the concrete. Paint the Quadrangle "bleek."

Hard times for a well-situated, well-designed, and well-maintained retail and entertainment hub like the Quadrangle don't jibe with the booming economy. Just like a recent trend among Dallas art galleries to look outside the metropolis for artists to represent and show doesn't make sense when Dallas artists got unprecedented recognition this year in New York's esteemed Whitney Biennial. Recent retrospectives around town of the best hometown talents—Nic Nicolson, Dan Rizzio, Bill Kamodere, David Bates—made not a few local art lovers wistful for more recognition of established Dallas artists and for more faith in the city's new crop of up-and-comers. **Cynthia Mulcahy** will tell you Houston artists sell better than Dallas artists at **Mulcahy Modern**; **Nancy Whitteback** will tell you she's hired a freelance narrator to beat the bushes throughout Texas to find new artists to show at **Conduit Gallery**; and **Barry Whistler** will say that his gallery's bread-and-butter talents like **Ted Kincadee** draw big crowds, but the fickle Dallas art-buying public wants more of the East- and West-Coast anointed to hang in its Preston Hollow living rooms.

Paint the Dallas art scene "confused."

Don't get Lynn Rushton started on this topic. A self-described plodder, a "workaday artist," she grew up in Dallas, and some of her best art memories are here. She remembers the Quadrangle as a place where artists gathered in the now-dismal courtyard on the weekends for open-air painting, and friendly exchanges with shoppers and neighbors out for a stroll. "I still have a caricature of myself, with dogs ears and a tennis racket, that one of those artists drew," Rushton says. "My mother took us all over town for art—she called it enrichment—and I wouldn't trade my childhood here for anything." Rushton recalls countless visits to the Dallas Museum of Art when it was at Fair Park, and a pre-adolescent epiphany that she, too, would become an artist. She left Dallas for school, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Vanderbilt and a Master of Fine Arts from Tulane. "I swore I'd never come back to Dallas after falling in love with New Orleans," she says. But close ties and the unmatched support system of her extended, Italian-

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American family here brought her back. "All the people I love are here," she says. "And most of the people I like."

Rushton cultivates connections among the close community of artists in Dallas in the same way she builds her encaustic-on-panel paintings—layer by layer, bit by bit. Word-of-mouth and friend-of-a-friend referrals keep the 33-year-old artist steadily showing her work here, although she doesn't have a Dallas galleryist, and her Austin gallery owner **Wally Workman**, **Melissa Sauvage**, principal of **Sauvage Art Services**, whose clients include the **ArtCenter of Plano** and **Deep Ellum Lofts**, gave Rushton her first solo show in March 1999. Sauvage was the founding director of the ill-fated **Deep Ellum Center for the Arts** who broke out from showing self-taught, street-wise **Deep Ellum** spray painters and pop artists to showcase the more mainstream work of local artists such as Rushton. "I think she's somebody to watch," Sauvage says. "What attracted me to her at DECA was the strong impressionist style, the bright colors. I loved the composition. At that time her images centered around a rural European lifestyle, and she also incor-



Dallas artist Lynn Noelle Rushton revives the ancient encaustic technique for "Love Letters: Somewhere in Europe," on view nowhere in Dallas.

porated Spanish elements. I think the thing I liked best was her mastery of the technique of encaustic. It's so difficult."

Encaustic is another connection for Rushton. Her sense of a link to ancient art history and the first records of women artists seeps into her conversation as she explains that encaustic is a mixture of dammar varnish, beeswax, and pigment, mixed on a heated palette and applied with heated tools to keep it pliable until it hits the painting's surface. "They found a 13th-century woman in France buried with her encaustic tools," she says. "I have a background in art history, and I've always been fascinated with weird frescoes and older things like that. And contemporarily with frescoes, the ancient Greeks used encaustic. Greek statues that we think of as stark white were actually brightly colored with encaustic. They even found traces of encaustic on the Parthenon." Her work at the DECA show referenced art history in other ways. There was a Van Gogh moment in "Saltar," where yellow fields of grain seemed to wave in an imaginary wind. The waxy, raised surface of the medium—and the artist's skillful use of it—adds texture and life to the image.

Viewers saw Monet in her "Wishing Well" and "Bridal Veil," works on paper blending pastels, encaustic, and acrylic paint for a softer feel and brighter effect.

For her hastily assembled and short-lived Quadrangle exhibition, attended by a surprising 200 eager viewers with 50 percent sold the first night, Rushton relied out new figurative work called "Love Letters." Followers of the artist noted a new level of accomplishment and recognition of her delicate finesse with the unwieldy encaustic technique. "Her work was more layered a couple of years ago," Sauvage says. "These newer pieces are

more refined, with more subtle layers." In "Love Letters: Somewhere in Europe," Rushton paints two soldiers writing letters in an army tent by candlelight. The men's features are nearly photographic, but expressive in a way that only painters can capture. In "Romance Novel," Rushton is successful in giving the painting a literary quality. The image of a woman drinking coffee and reading a book is similar to the scene in "Afternoon Cafe," the painting that won her "Best of Show" in last summer's Quadrangle Art Festival.

The trouble with Dallas artists like Rushton who don't have Dallas gallery connections and aren't hell-bent on shameless self-promotion is how rare it is to be able to see their work. Rushton's only scheduled show will be held next summer in Austin at the **Workman Gallery** in Pecan Square off Sixth Street. Rushton is grateful for the opportunity, and realistic about her relationship with the gallery. "Wally [Workman] likes me because I'm responsible, reliable, and my work sells," Rushton says. "She knows I'll always follow up. She knows I'll make her job easier." Sauvage says Rushton may be selling herself short. "She's exceptional, so eventually she will stand out," she says. "She's mastered a difficult medium. She's confident without being egotistical, and that makes her work more pure and honest."

Rushton's own frank self-appraisal gives Sauvage's assessment credibility. "Hey, I'll never be in the Whitney," she says with a laugh. "You won't catch me scraping hair off famous people's sofas, putting it in little bottles and calling it art." She calls herself an "old-fashioned genre painter," and believes she'll end up where she wants to be—better-known and better shown in Dallas. To look at her work, you'd think that makes sense. But then you look at the Quadrangle, and realize nothing really makes sense in this town.

Lynn Rushton's paintings can't be viewed anywhere in Dallas. So check out another show this week, such as **BITT's** first comprehensive alumni exhibition, **Departure/Return**, which runs from **October 13-November 19** in the **Meadows Museum**. (214) 768-2121 (weekdays) or 214-768-2740 (weekends)

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