

# The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1996

IN PERSON

## Jazz on Canvas

Hoboken Painter Takes the Elements of Music and Transcribes Them Into a Suite for the Eye



Jack Manning/The New York Times

Serena Bocchino with an untitled work in her studio on Observer Highway, the namesake of her show at the Bergen Museum.

By BARRY SCHWABSKY

## HOBOKEN

**A** PAINTING need not be about only the things you can see. It can just as easily concern things that you hear, experiences of sound as well as sight. At least, that's the assumption under which Serena Bocchino has been working. In doing so, she has placed herself in the tradition of such esteemed predecessors as Whistler, who often titled his paintings "nocturnes" or "symphonies," and Mondrian, whose last works were inspired by the boogie-woogie music he heard in his New York City exile in the 1940's.

So a visitor to Ms. Bocchino's studio here, with its wide vistas across the train yards looking toward Manhattan, or to her exhibition "Observer Highway," on view through Nov. 24 at the Bergen Museum of Art and Science in Paramus, should expect to think in terms of not only line, form and color, but also rhythm, volume and tone. The show, having traveled through New Jersey and to New York City, has arrived at the Bergen Museum as its final stop.

A 36-year-old artist whose work evokes music might be expected to take her inspiration from rock-and-roll, perhaps even from rap. But the titles of Ms. Bocchino's paintings tell a different tale: "Early Bird," "Miles Ahead," and "Cool Baker," with their allusions to Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Chet Baker, evoke the sounds of jazz. And not just any jazz, but that of a particular era, namely the be-bop of the 1940's and the cool jazz of the 50's. "Not that I necessarily put on a certain tape to listen to while I made the painting," Ms. Bocchino hastens to explain of her musical allusions. "The relationship between the music and the painting is much less specific than that."

Ms. Bocchino credits her mother, Lucia Confalone-Bocchino, an artist whose specialty was assemblage, as being among her major influences. "Actually, I feel so conservative compared to my mother," she adds. "Everything she did was so wild. Everything about our house was different. The hallways were orange! There were clashing colors and patterns; nothing matched. It was constant visual stimulation." It certainly doesn't sound like the typical Hillsdale household of the 1960's. "Now," Ms. Bocchino adds, "I prefer something more minimal in my living space." Does the kind of jazz reflected in her paintings refer to what she grew up listening to? No, she says. "It was more opera and classical. It's really been in the last 5 to 10 years that I've become more involved with jazz."

**S**TILL, the jazz connection makes sense because the paintings maintain a balance between passion and restraint that Ms. Bocchino's jazz masters would have taken a shine to. Similarly, their delight in subdividing a musical beat and delaying or anticipating its accents rather than placing their notes on them four-square finds an affinity with a painter whose work implies rather than defines its forms, and in which glissandos between one color and another can imply a chromatic keynote you'd be hard put to pin down because it turns up only in passing. And then a subtle glow emanates from the canvases.

Another reason it makes sense is that while Ms. Bocchino is keenly interested in the art of her own generation, her paintings are clearly just as informed by the abstract art of the 1940's and 50's, including that of some relatively overlooked figures, like William Baryotes and Adolph Gottlieb, as well as big names like Arshile Gorky, Philip Guston or Cy Twombly. It's not that Ms.

Bocchino is just purveying retro style. Part of the pungency of her paintings is the way they insinuate half-forgotten sights and sounds into a vividly immediate context.

Although Ms. Bocchino first exhibited her work in Manhattan in the East Village a decade ago, she has never sought either the raw, aggressive-emoationalism of the neo-expressionist art that attracted so much attention there nor the cool irony of the "neo-gen" that was the inevitable reaction. Only jazz could have taught her that you can wear your heart on your sleeve — if the cut of the sleeve is irreproachably elegant.

Ms. Bocchino still recalls the East Village of the early 1980's, when she was working toward her master of arts degree at New York University, as being "the best time to be an art student."

"It was so easy to meet other artists, to show your work, have a dialogue," she says. "There was a real warmth there that doesn't exist anymore. Everything seemed so close and easy. I remember being in the building where Larry Rivers had his studio. You'd go to the bathroom and you'd hear Larry playing the saxophone down the hall."

Eight years ago, high rents in Manhattan led Ms. Bocchino to cross the river and look for studio space in Hoboken. For years she worked in a building on Observer Highway, but in 1993 she joined fellow artists buying a building on Grand Street. Its affordable 4,000-square-foot live-work lofts seemed like every artist's dream. But it turned out to be a nightmare when: in January, puddles of mercury from a factory that had once been occupied it were found under the floorboards.

Like many other residents, Ms. Bocchino, her husband and their 18-month-old son

were both found to have dangerous levels of mercury in their blood. It's not a topic the normally voluble artist talks about easily. "I was just crying on Channel 9 last night; it's enough," she says. The Grand Street building has been condemned, and Ms. Bocchino finds herself deep in litigation and back in a different studio in her old building on Observer Highway.

**I**T'S not easy to see how anyone can have worked so diligently on painting while under such stress. Seeing the new paintings Ms. Bocchino is working on in the studio underlined a fact that might not have seemed so significant when looking at the finished works: unlike most painters, her process begins not with color, not with line, but with texture. She'll often lay bits of cheesecloth into the ground of the painting so that when she starts painting, she gets some hints of form or some space-implying roughness that she can work with — or, more often, work against. "The initial texture is what starts pulling me into the canvas," she explains. You can still catch sight of these textured passages in the finished paintings, but because the interaction of color, brush stroke and line has become so brisk by then, they're easy to overlook.

"These days I'm looking for the most basic form of line for my paintings," the artist explains as she points out the emphatic, almost crude-looking black marks she has laid into one of the works in progress. Trying to evade facileness, she'll just as often make her marks with a bent wire, a piece of wood or a squeegee as a brush. Lines pierce the color areas but also tie them together. The color is typically suave, full of delicate interfusions and surprising modulations, smooth but with a sweet-and-sour aftertaste. But the dichotomy of line and color is more apparent than real: lines thread in and out of hazy color-spaces just as colors-migrate through the space of other colors and mutate as they move.

The feeling that within these paintings everything is in transition, that none of their elements have become too strictly defined, may be exactly what keeps them fresh. David Messer, the director of the Bergen Museum, marvels that even the largest of Ms. Bocchino's paintings "still maintains the same spontaneity as if it were a drawing on a small piece of paper." The artist herself puts it more simply: "You want to keep that surprise and unsureness in the work."