

Riva Sweetrocket's deft touch blends magic and realism



Riva Sweetrocket's pastels are on view through April 12 at Plus Gallery. Far right, a piece titled "Secret," 43 by 38 inches. *John Prieto, The Denver Post.*

By Kyle MacMillan *Denver Post Fine Arts Critic*

Although Riva Sweetrocket had been included in earlier exhibitions, she first created a big splash on the area art scene in 2006 with a large-scale solo exhibition at the Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities. And the ripples just keep coming.

What struck viewers then and continues to impress in a group of new works on view through April 12 at the Plus Gallery is the distinctive way the Denver artist virtuosically melds the old and new in unexpected, sometimes startling ways.

Sweetrocket works in pastel, a seemingly old-fashioned medium more typically associated these days with quaint floral pictures and the like. But she employs the colored crayons in ways that are fresh, original and undeniably contemporary.

"It was kind of an accident, actually," she said of her first

encounter with the medium. "I got a box of pastels at a yard sale and I just started using them, and I kind of fell in love with them and got really good at working with them.

And there was never any kind of thing that made me want to go in a different direction. I was sort of absorbed."

Sweetrocket has proceeded in a kind of trial-and-error fashion, constantly improving her skills in the medium, reaching an extraordinary level of technical mastery in these latest paintings, some of which are more than 6 feet wide.

Examples include her fluid, naturalistic rendering of the

rippling, splashing water in "Absolution" (47 by 76 inches) and the minute, highly detailed rendering of the leaves and branches in the background depiction of the "Cultivate" (36 by 50 inches).

Indeed, so faithfully realized are many aspects of these works that some people have been tempted to call them "photorealist," but such an appellation distorts the meaning of the term and mischaracterizes this work at the same time.

It seems more appropriate to place Sweetrocket's paintings under the heading of "magic realism," because she

always introduces some element of fancy or fantasy into her compositions even if the components, taken on their own, are realistic.

A wonderful example is perhaps the show's most immediately appealing work, "Sweet Tooth" (72 by 54 inches), which depicts two hands holding a gigantic stack of pancakes overflowing with syrup being poured from some unseen source outside the frame of the composition.

Before painstakingly realizing her often layered compositions in pastel, she assembles them digitally, combining photographs she takes with images she finds on the Internet or in magazines — an approach that enhances their feeling of contemporaneity.

This exhibition is titled "Handle with Care," because all the works incorporate one or two hands in one way or another.

"I've done some paintings that involved hands in the past," Sweetrocket said, "and I just felt like I had more to say about hands, that there was a lot more material there to work from. So, I had that as a jumping off point for this show."

In addition to their ever-improving technical sophistication, the pastels have grown more complex conceptually and compositionally as well, with these latest works offering more active backgrounds and intriguing juxtapositions of colored and



monochromatic elements.

Also fascinating is Sweetrocket's use of trompe l'oeil, such as the strips of tape seemingly adhering a snapshot to the background of "Cultivate." But, of course, the large scale of the piece makes any real deception impossible.

Where she has sometimes gone astray in the recent past is by narratively overloading certain compositions. While such a dimension exists in these works, she conveys the hint of a story quickly and efficiently, especially in "Secret."

Sweetrocket is a bright light on the Denver scene, and it is fun to watch her art and career leap forward, as they do in this successful exhibition.

Fine arts critic Kyle MacMillan can be reached at 303-954-1675 or kmacmillan@denverpost.com.

"HANDLE WITH CARE"

At Plus Gallery,
2350 Lawrence St.

A solo exhibition of new pastels by Denver artist Riva Sweetrocket.

Through April 12. Noon to 6 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays.

Free. 303-296-0927 or plusgallery.com.