

Butcher offers fresh Roach

New works by Dani Roach at Sam the Butcher gallery, that is...

BY BARRY WILLIS

One of the dismaying realities about art is that far more of it is produced than there is space for display. Non-gallery settings often double as art venues; cafés and restaurants have traditionally decorated their walls with the works of eager artists.

Marin has a couple of novel art galleries in locations that at first glance might appear inappropriate. One is California Closets on Du Bois Street in San Rafael's industrial area. Its huge interior space and expansive walls are ideal for art, and for more than a year the store has hosted exhibits of local artists, with monthly music-and-wine events.

One of the most unusual and seductive transformations of an old retail space is Sam the Butcher at 19 Ross Common in Ross. The name derives from the family-owned butcher shop that occupied the site for decades, until it was devastated by last year's flood. Now a combination contemporary art gallery and minimalist office—owner Marcel Houtzager runs an investment business there, too—the space is ideal for viewing art, with high ceilings and plenty of natural light.

An art enthusiast more than a professional gallerist, Houtzager began featuring local artists at the renovated Sam the Butcher last October with "Going Home," a group photography show of outstanding work by Marin high school students. The most recent show was "Color Matters," an exhibit of bold abstract works by Marie-Louise Ullmark.

Houtzager doesn't run the gallery on a for-profit basis—"I'd rather not do that," he explains—but instead offers artists exposure without commercial pressure. That philosophy is evident in the gallery's lighting and décor. Instead of the harsh hard-white that's standard in most galleries, its soft yellow walls offer a warm background for paintings, ideal for works rife with subtle colors.

Dani Roach's mixed-media creations are perfectly at home in this supportive environment. A resident artist at Sausalito's Industrial Center Building, the North Carolina native has a compelling collection of large works on display in Ross—most of them abstract collage-and-paint combinations of watercolored rice paper, acrylic paint, string, paper towels—"whatever comes to hand," says the artist in her wry Southern contralto, one that has

lost none of its native euphony despite years in California.

Roach's work varies from subtle to extravagant: her "Spinning Wheel" suggests Georgia O'Keefe's florals, but with deeper texture and an attenuated palette, thanks to the use of tinted tissue paper and dripped

paint. There's plenty of action in Roach's paintings—her "Sweet Tea" is an exercise in joy, with big blocks of color that simultaneously seem to leap forward and recede from the focal plane. Her paired 4-by-4-foot works—"Joy" and "Blue Glory"—are more muted, expres-

sions of what she calls her "unintentional feminine side...like my Southern accent." A tall diptych near Houtzager's desk features bright happy colors offset with subtle shadings, due to the artist's extensive use of watercolors. "It's hard to get intensity with watercolors," Roach comments, "But somehow I make it happen."

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While most of Roach's work is abstract, some of it includes recognizable forms—the earth/mountain/sky vista in "Tibet Remembered," Virginia's autumnal warmth in "Southern Comfort," or the seeming serenity beneath the water's surface in "Deep Sea." All three have both dynamism and stillness, dreamlike familiarity and strangeness, as if seen through a very forgiving soft-focus lens.

Roach is less forgiving about herself. At the back of the gallery is a self-portrait, "The Dark Side of Broken," in which a faceless artist confronts an imposing easel, the dominant object in the foreground and the only thing in the frame that's fully realized. In the artist's hands are dozens of brushes, wielded like an arsenal of weapons to tame the oppressive beast of art. The painting says more about the process of creating art than could be covered in dozens of texts on theory. The simplest, most elegant creations sometimes require soul-searing effort. And it reveals a side of the easygoing, soft-spoken artist that would otherwise remain hidden. *



'Transformation Realized': It's hard to get intensity with watercolors, says Roach. 'But somehow I make it happen.'