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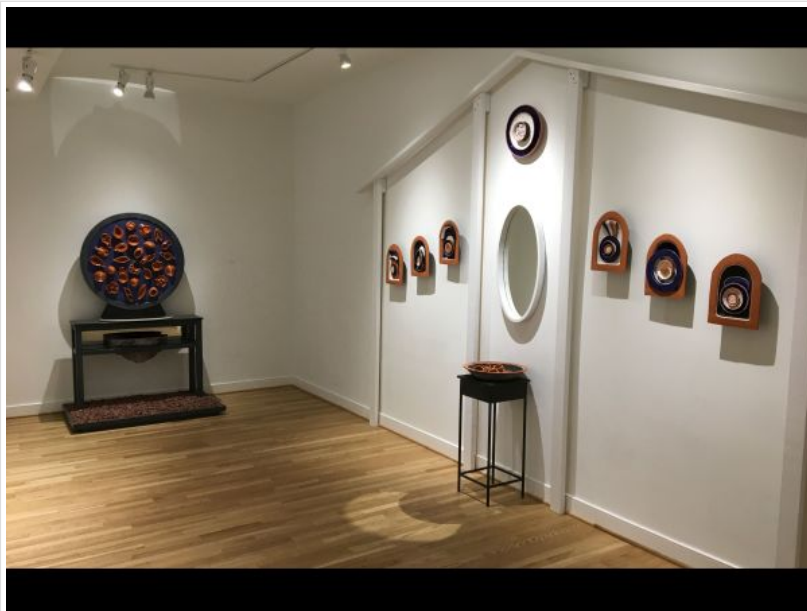
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## East City Art Reviews: Nancy Sausser and Madeline Stratton at IA&A at Hillyer

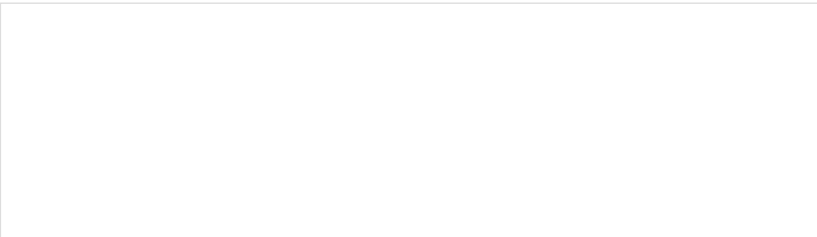


By Eric Hope on July 23, 2019



*Quotidian Shift* installation view  
Nancy Sausser  
Photo for East City Art by Eric Hope.

Two adjacent galleries; two different treatments of materials; a common quest for understanding the self. Works by Nancy Sausser and Madeline Stratton, now on view at IA&A at Hillyer, provide an ideal laboratory for discovering affinities between artists using dissimilar media to uncover those hidden memories or experiences that connect the individual to the world around them. Sausser's *Quotidian Shift* and Stratton's *What We Forget to Remember* are intended as solo shows, each in a dedicated gallery with their own artist statements. Visually they create distinctly individual atmospheres for contemplation, with Sausser's cool ceramics serving as terrestrial shrines in contrast to Stratton's more colorfully flamboyant renderings of remembered architecture. Yet below the surface a quiet dialogue between the galleries does emerge. While their bodies of work may have parted at a fork in the road, the paths they travel run remarkably parallel.





*What We Forget to Remember* installation view  
Madeline Stratton  
Photo for East City Art by Eric Hope.

Nancy Sausser's sculptures create metaphorical connections to the earth, with elemental shapes that reference the evolutionary processes that influence the world around us. Her layered works begin with primordial forms such as seedpods and fossils. These individual shapes are massed in small groupings, enveloped within vessels and presented to the viewer as though they were precious offerings. *Threshold*, for instance, contains seed-like ceramic wafers nestled within oval forms reminiscent of eggshells that are in turn protected by the wide circular dish in which they lay. Similarly, *A Circle in the Land* displays a variety of pod-like structures, hollowed out by the loss of their seeds and captured together within a slowly-spinning disk that could reference a planetary biosphere. *Three Ways In* also positions seemingly ancient materials within concave vessels. Whether wall-mounted or presented on artist-made plinths, these works are philosophically related to one another by the repetition of ever-larger concentric forms and visually aligned by their restrained earth tones punctuated by alternating patterns of white and royal blue.

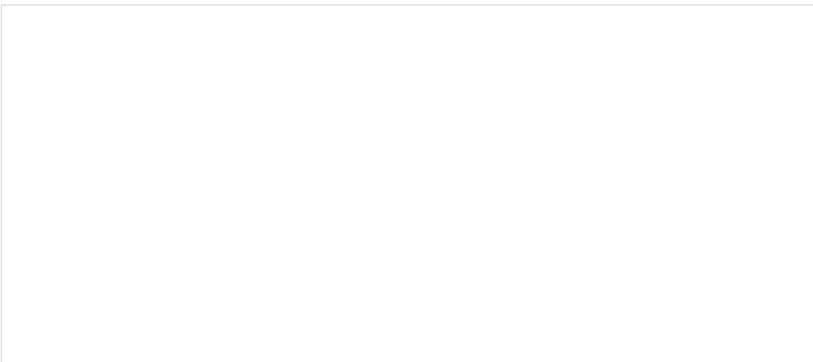




*A Circle on the Land*, 2019  
Nancy Sausser

Ceramic, wood and mirrors Photo for East City Art by Eric Hope.

Madeline Stratton's more diverse color palette pulls you into her gallery space; combinations such as aqua and magenta or gray and yellow immediately capture the viewer's attention. Those abrupt, shifting color patterns serve to mimic and delineate physical constructions such as walls, doors and floors, creating architectural forms reminiscent of interior family spaces. While Stratton's wall-hung pieces exist in two dimensions, they create a compelling sense of depth by toying with shapes and materials. *Where it glowed, and they sat* for example disrupts the picture plane with its composition of scattered, geometric forms, each with its own shade of color. In many of these geometric forms Stratton has carved out voids, such as in *Where it got cold, and they escaped* which dramatically features an empty space within the middle of the work. Several of these hollowed-out spaces include intricate, hand-stitched lines representing furniture such as in *Where it slept, and they slept too* that features the outline of a rocking chair floating in space. The overall effect suggests a domestic space that exists at the intersection of hazy memory and pictorial truth.





*Where it hung, and they imagined*, 2019  
 Nancy Sausser  
 Hand-stitched thread, tulle and acrylic on wood  
 Photo for East City Art by Eric Hope.

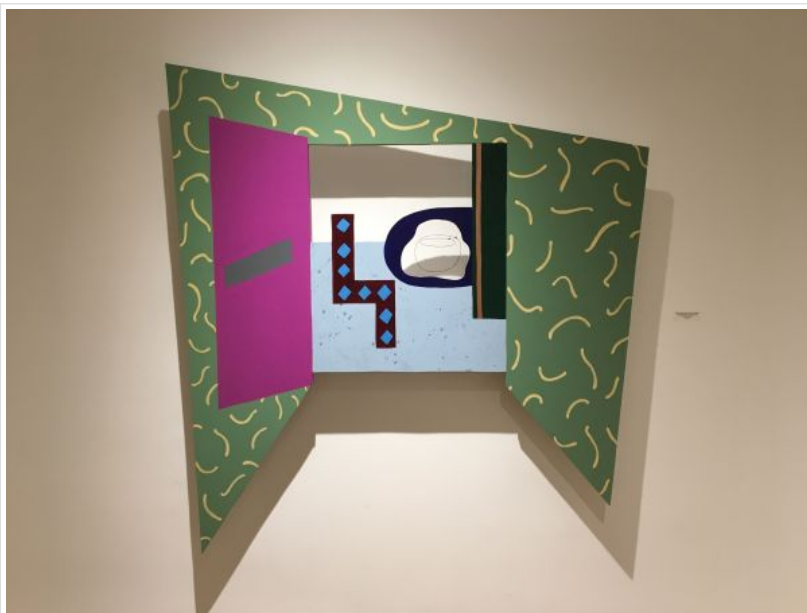
With their layers of color and shape, Sausser’s sculptural installations invoke a certain visual rhythm intended to lull the viewer and gently probe the subconscious mind. The diminutive sculptural forms at the core of the works suggest powerful archetypes that conjoin the natural and manmade worlds, including fecundity, decay, and ancient hieroglyphics. Though this is my first time viewing Sausser’s work I cannot help but feel I’ve been to these places before: deep-seated memories stir in the recesses of the mind. The circular vessels that visually cradle these shapes act as cocoons, creating a blanket of comforting protection that suggests a certain fragility within the pods and shells. Several works take the form of sculptural installations, such as *Threshold* where a large, shallow ceramic dish serves as a kind of altar. Other works, such as *Reflecting Pool: The Stillness of Water* and *A Circle on the Land* position shallow, empty vessels at the focal center of the installation, emphasizing the centrality of the component to the meaning of the entire piece. These vessels lack nesting forms but cannot be considered “empty”. Indeed by containing water (in the case of the former) and a mirror (in the latter) they directly connect the smaller forms at the periphery of the work to the base elements of nature. In doing so, Sausser is reinforcing the linkages between all life forms and notions of universal truths. Tellingly, those linkages are not visually specified. It is as if the artist is still searching herself, mining layers deeper than her consciousness for answers that are perhaps buried in her very DNA.



*Threshold (detail)*, 2019  
 Nancy Sausser



While Madeline Stratton's more varied color selection connotes a lighter, playful attitude towards the subconscious mind, her desire to illuminate deep-seated memory is equally evident. What differentiates Stratton from her neighboring gallery partner is an emphasis on personal (rather than collective) history. Here the artist's color combinations create specificity: Stratton is attempting to conjure specific places and times from her own past rather than more universally-associated memories. The planes of color are reminiscent of Henri Matisse cut-outs from the 1940s but here exert the rigid construction of floors and walls in three-dimensional space. The cubic volumes suggested in the works are tempered by visual spaces that position probable entry and exit points, such as in *Where it hung, and they imagined* which places a doorway just right of center. But it is the second, larger void on the left-hand side of this particular work that requires more investigation. Here the suggestion of two rectangular shapes delineated by thin black lines float in the void, each with faint, smaller rectangles placed at all four corners. They hover in two-dimensional space, seeming to move in and out of the emptiness and simultaneously acting as a key component of the work and as discrete objects in and of themselves. Are they meant to suggest adolescent heartthrob posters or perhaps college dorm decoration? The answer is inconclusive. A similar quandary exists in *Where it got cold, and they escaped* in which the artist positions a vessel within the round form of a table. Does it represent the presence or absence of something comforting? How can we go about making old memories concrete when the details begin to fog over? Stratton indicates that is the conundrum we face when peering into our personal histories.



*Where it got cold, and they escaped, 2019*  
Madeline Stratton  
Hand-stitched thread, tulle and acrylic on wood  
Photo for East City Art by Eric Hope.

While their aesthetics visually diverge, their approaches to examining notions of collective and individual pasts complement one another. Continued inspection demonstrates that each artist includes visual components that stylistically reflect the other's work. For instance, Sausser's *Threshold* and *Three Ways In* incorporate white frames around the outer edges of the works that resemble architectural shapes. While they do not connote the same dynamic as Stratton's treatment of space (given the way they blend into the gallery walls) the framings center the totems within a defined space. Likewise the vessel delineated in *Where it got cold, and they escaped* as well as the circular lines depicted in *Where it glowed, and they sat* are two-dimensional renderings of the forms used repeatedly in Sausser's ceramic objects. While unanticipated, these artistic affinities demonstrate how individual and collective memories can in some cases overlap.

Whether you gravitate visually towards one artist over the other will largely be a matter of taste, reflective indeed of our individual natures. Stratton's bright colors will delight some while the Sausser's earth tones will calm others. Together, the artists demonstrate that the search for universal notions of truth – those ideals that bind us together as humans – is inextricably linked to the ways in which we as conceptualize both our sense of individuality and our relationship to greater world around us. You cannot have one without the other, they seem to suggest, since connections between self and community



are conjoined on both the conscious and unconscious levels of the psyche. Kudos to the curatorial staff for having the foresight to pair these two exhibitions together.

*Nancy Sausser and Madeline Stratton are on view at IA+A at Hillyer through July 28, 2019. For more information, visit their website [here](#).*

Banner Image: *Where it glowed and they sat*, 2019; Madeline Stratton; Hand-stitched thread, tulle and acrylic on wood. Photo for East City Art by Eric Hope.

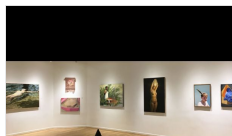
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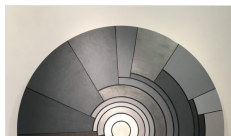
### Authored by: [Eric Hope](#)

Eric Hope is a curator and writer based in Brookland. He moved to Washington DC in 1997 and a twist of fate found him a volunteer marketing job at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. In 2009, after ten years of marketing work at large museums in DC he moved into the realm of curating, staging a variety of solo, duo and small-group shows for the Evolve Urban Arts Project. He currently freelances as a curator and writes about local artists and the DC arts scene for a variety of online publications. Originally from Missouri, Hope holds degrees in International Relations and Public Service Administration from DePaul University in Chicago.

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