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Nancy Lorenz at San Diego Museum of Art: a feast for the eyes



"Moon Gold Cardboard I" (2013): Moon gold leaf, clay, resin, cardboard, on wood panel. (Adam Reich)

**By Martina Schimitschek on April 26, 2018**

Nancy Lorenz draws inspiration for her art from many sources — from the traditional gilt artists of Italy and the 1960s Italian arte povera movement to American painter James McNeill Whistler. But it was the five years she spent in Japan as a teenager that is her biggest influence.

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Her distinctive East-meets-West style is characterized by the use of gold and silver leaf, lacquer and mother-of-pearl inlay.

Lorenz describes her work, which ranges in scale from room-sized panels to small boxes, as “kind of a combination of abstract expressionism along with Japanese techniques.”

The result is a visual feast of rich metallics often set against utilitarian materials such as cardboard and burlap.

“It is tremendously sensual art, both in so far as the forms themselves can be very gestural and sinuous and recalling natural forms, but also her use of materials is very unusual. I’ve never seen work quite like it — the way she combines lacquers and gilding work and inlay. Many of these techniques are quite traditional but she uses them in fairly unconventional ways,” said Ariel Plotek, curator of modern and contemporary art the San Diego Museum of Art.

Plotek organized the New York-based artist’s first solo museum exhibition, “Nancy Lorenz: Moon Gold,” which opens at the Balboa Park museum on Friday. It’s a mid-career retrospective for Lorenz, who often collaborates with designers and architects. Public commissions include Chanel stores, the Beverly Hilton in Los Angeles and the Gucci Towers in Tokyo.

The San Diego exhibition includes more than 70 pieces representing 14 years of work. Paintings, panel screens, drawings, sculptures and boxes cover the range of her art. Some of her latest pieces were inspired from items in the museum’s Asian collection.

“I got to spend a fair amount of time with my sketchbook drinking in some of my favorite pieces in the collection,” Lorenz said. “One was a beautiful lacquer box with chrysanthemums on it, which later fed into some work I made for the exhibition. It became a box that was inspired by it and then it became a much larger painting, which has raised gilt flowers on a cedar woodgrain panel.”

The 7-by-10-foot painting is among numerous large pieces in the show. Another was inspired by a Japanese sculpture of the Flying Apsaras (celestial being) in the museum’s

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permanent collection. The largest work on display is a 12-foot cubic room that is covered with wood panels depicting an abstract rock garden.

“I love working large. The scale for me is really important because something about the larger gestures are essential to the work,” Lorenz said.

But her boxes — inspired by the containers for the cups used in a Japanese tea ceremony — are equally impressive. Many are part of her “Pour” collection, where she allows a type of gesso to drip beyond the surface, which is then gilded.

Lorenz makes her own lacquer using shellac and pigment, a technique she perfected restoring Asian antiques. “It’s the layering and the refined polishing between each layer that creates the luminous surface,” she said.

It was the beauty of the pieces, Plotek said, that drew him to Lorenz’s art.

“There’s an understanding of tradition and willingness to turn those traditional techniques on their head to achieve very new and innovative results and effects,” he said.

“It has a kind of otherworldliness.”

“Nancy Lorenz: Moon Gold”

**When:** April 27-Sept. 3

**Where:** San Diego Museum of Art, 1450 El Prado, Balboa Park

**Admission:** \$15 for adults; discounts for students, military and 65 and older; free for 17 and under

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