

art review BY MARC AWODEY

Body Piercing

The “Isenheim Altarpiece” of 1515, by German master Matthias Grünewald, was commissioned by monks of the Antonite monastery hospital at Isenheim in Alsace, a sort of Renaissance Mayo Clinic for the dreaded skin disease called Saint Anthony’s Fire. The work’s purpose was to remind patients that Christ, too, had suffered. Its central interior section, one of nine unfolding hinged panels, is a grisly portrayal of the scourged Christ’s agonizing crucifixion.

EXHIBIT
“Strata & Transmutations,” new encaustic paintings and manipulated prints by Linda E. Jones. 215 College Street Artists’ Cooperative Gallery, Burlington. Through June 17.

ARTWORK
“Rocks, Stitches & Rock Ring” by Linda E. Jones

PHOTO
Marc Awodey

Some similar motive may have inspired “Strata & Transmutations,” Linda Jones’ new exhibit at 215 College Street Artists’ Cooperative Gallery in Burlington. In this new collection of mixed-media works on paper, she unflinchingly incorporates injury into her aesthetic. That strange emphasis, combined with her restless search for new technical challenges, ensures a dynamic show and demonstrates why Jones has been one of Vermont’s leading artists through the last three decades.

A slice of Grünewald’s savior’s torn and punctured flesh seems to have been passed down to the Burlington painter. Her 47-by-35-inch Iris print “Torso with Twigs” is a bloodied abstraction that’s among Jones’ toughest images. “Torso with Twigs” blends digital pictures of a wounded Caucasian mid-section to create a vision of palpable pain. The skin appears to be punctured by wires and sutures, reminiscent of the thorns and slivers rendered by Grünewald. Jones saturates her paper with encaustic medium to

make it especially translucent. That application also compounds the richness of Iris print’s ink-jet printing, as the ink appears to float on the surface rather than soak into the paper.

References to medical trauma are everywhere in the show, although not all are as harsh as “Torso with Twigs.” “Ribs on Rock” contains strata of mixed-media painting applied on an Iris print. It’s also a layered narrative. The 17-by-23-inch rock form, superimposed on a chest X-ray, employs an ovoid shape that Jones introduced to her work in 1988. In a brief statement posted with the exhibition, she describes it as becoming “an integral part of my iconographic language ever since.” Patches of rusty red encaustic drip over the paper, and a white line tracing the sternum from an upside-down perspective meanders over the X-ray.

In “Rocks, Stitches & Rock Ring,” the bulky mass of a pale beige stone, dappled with greenish gray, contrasts with sinewy red lines, which seem stitched into and over the stone. Lines and shapes also subtly slide free of the rectangle, imparting a sense of organic movement. The digital print is further enlivened with swaths of encaustic and mixed media. An interesting technical subtext to the show is Jones’ evolution from the painterly surfaces of monoprints and canvasses to more transparent, illusionistic Iris surfaces — sometimes purely digital and sometimes mixed with spontaneous painterly statements.

“Tidal Tummy with Skate’s Egg” echoes a series exhibited at 215 College Street last year, based on Atlantic Ocean tidal life. A crisp, well-defined, four-horned skate’s egg floats in the foreground of the 54-by-44-inch print, as murky layers of indistinct silvery gray — perhaps X-rays altered beyond recognition — recede into the distance. The skate’s egg is described with the same ruddy red-orange encaustic that Jones splashed onto “Ribs on Rock,” but it’s purely a print rather than a mixed-media image.

A large installation entitled “Traces of Life” originated with photos Jones took in Scotland of a 3000-year-old burial cairn. A circle of stones collaged and printed on Reeves BFK paper transverses three hanging panels of handmade Nepali paper permeated with encaustic wax. The strange outline of an armored knight in repose — taken from a relief carving on a flat slab — is projected through the panels to cast a “Shroud of Turin”-style ghostly image in the circle.

The image of the knight’s grave is as peaceful as “Torso with Twigs” may be troubling to some. But Jones’ art is about more than twigs, stones and broken bones. X-rays and translucent papers are metaphors for the act of revealing cloudy enigmas. Like a multi-panel altarpiece, “Strata & Transmutations” is a mysterious narrative, turning on the transience of earthly affliction. Viewers may read into that story yet another layer of meaning, drawn from their own perceptions. ⑦