

View from the ivory tower

Too many schools of thinking merge to mixed creative effect in Julia Stoops' new show

By D.K. ROW

Special writer, The Oregonian

Walking through Julia Stoops' new show at the Alysia Duckler Gallery is a lot like reading the work of a writer who clutters sentences. There's a need to understand the value of economy and lyric simplicity that make writing a craft and not merely a talent.

In other words, Stoops needs an editor.

But don't dismiss Stoops too quickly. She was selected for the 1997 Oregon Biennial and has a reputation as one of the headiest of all local artists. And her current show is an ambitious effort. Ironically, though, that may be part of the problem: Scrutinizing more than two dozen paintings and drawings in her show, one gets the feeling that Stoops has multiple languages at her disposal. But instead of choosing just one to communicate her ideas, she's chosen to speak all four or five, serving up a dialect that is decipherable and enjoyable in too few moments.

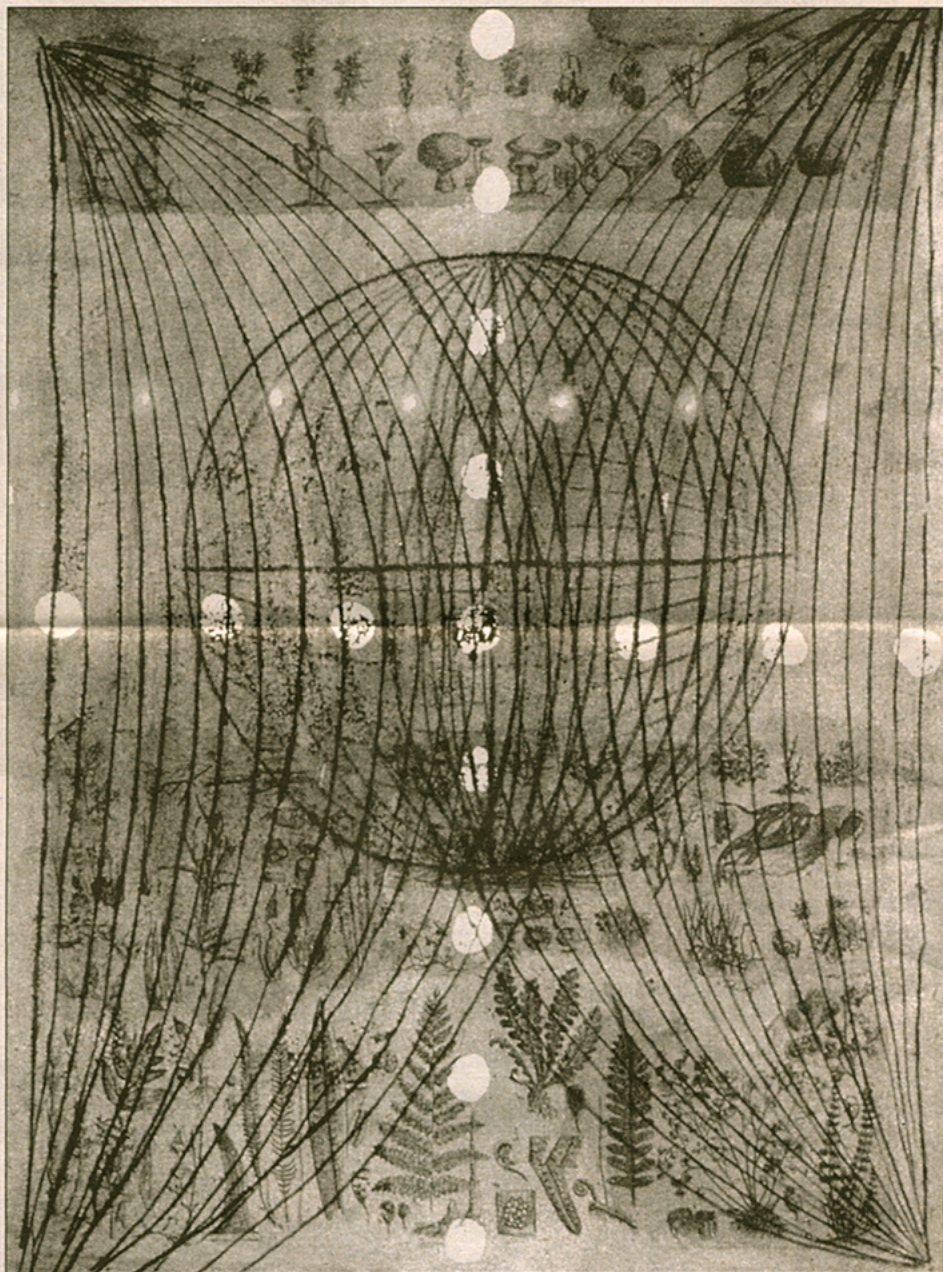
Stoops, a New Zealand citizen who was raised internationally, studied philosophy before going to art school. And it shows. The title of the exhibit, "Dialogues Part I, Part II," hints at the many schools of academic thinking that make her work look like a mock achievement test: transcendental idealism, Taoism, Buddhism, Romanticism, even bits of medievalism.

In a way, you can see the work as an attempt to codify a system of symbols from these schools of higher thinking, but at the end of the day, the best and most accessible art shouldn't be so hyper-formulated. In other words, where's the passion and what's the point of it all?

Yet there are moments that offer a glimpse — in many cases a long one — of what Stoops can do when she's on target. There's a patterning of circles and grids in numerous works that could be inspired by anyone from early-20th-century abstractionist Piet Mondrian to contemporary minimalist Agnes Martin. Consider the horizon in "Grey Lunar" and the foggy, aqueous bands in "Point of Contact." They could be hazy layers from our ozone or a very suspect rainbow.

But, too often, Stoops mixes and matches geometric patterns with variations on what she calls "iconic shapes" — ovals, hands, crosses and orbs are just a few — and after a dozen or so works, one senses a cold, fitful, scientific methodology at work.

How good a painter is Stoops, though? That's the real question after seeing the entire show. Behind the centuries-old schools of thinking that both inspire and hide the best of this current work, my guess is that she's a pretty good one.



Julia Stoops' "Crossings."

review

Julia Stoops

WHERE: Alysia Duckler Gallery, 1236 N.W. Hoyt St.

WHEN: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays; 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturdays; through Jan. 16.