Artwork that comes at you

PERSPECTIVES

By Christine Temin
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How far out from the wall must a work of art project to count as sculpture rather than relief? "Sculpture on the Wall," a fine show at the Boston College Gallery, 885 Center St., Newton, through February 27, explores that issue, using examples of work by five artists: Paul Bowen, Fritz Buehner, Stoney Conley, Michael Mulhern, and Dan Wills.

The twisted vines in Mulhern's large scale works trail several feet out from the wall, invading the viewer's space. In 'Slip-Slidin' Away (Funeral Rites)" a large, square, unfinished plywood box projects about a foot and a half out from the wall. Out of the box spill the vines and a row of dozens of gray squares of an indeterminate material. The clunkiness of the box contrasts with the meandering grace of the thick vines. Although sparse, the work has a powerful, muscular quality, and a dominating presence. When I entered the gallery, I gravitated toward it immediately.

The intent of Mulhern's startling work was unclear to me. Conley's fresco on panels, by contrast, are lucid, fully realized works, linking traditional, instantly recognizable techniques and forms with subjective, symbolic imagery. The panels have peaked tops, like Renaissance altarpieces or shrines. Covering the panels is thick plaster, and cut into the plaster are the archways of Gothic architecture. The contrast in scale suggests both intimate worship and grandiose cathedrals. The architectural references call up culture, religion and history. The panels are adorned with the rhythmic patterns - stripes, diamonds, abstracted flowers - of Italian buildings. They also give room to abstract shapes which seem to stand for cataclysmic events. Among the more literal images is a flower which arches over a doorway in "St. Catherine of Siena." The rust colored bloom is defined by an incised white line that seems almost gouged into the fresco, so passionate is it.

"Re/tas/te/fe" is one of Dan Wills' horizontal constructions based on wave shapes and springs-kled with glitter that gives a magical, fairytale quality. The waves, made of layers of wood that imply a sea that stretches far into the distance, are contained by an extremely active frame whose carved, symbolic imagery includes a monster baring his teeth, a hand whose fingerprints are perfect spirals, and a horseshoe. The sides of the frame angle outward, as if buckling under great weight.

Fritz Buehner's format and materials are simple and effective. His small pieces project less than a foot from the wall, meeting the short viewer at eye level. All are made of rough, splintered wood and painted in lively, impressionistic, brightly colored lines and spots. The wood is carved into ruffle, fan, or accordion shapes that swirl with the swooning grace of a Viennese waltz. Each little wooden form is poised on a narrow base, like a ballerina on pointe.

There is quiet poetry in the way the various elements of Paul Bowen's tiny sculptures harmonize. With what looks like the utmost care and deliberation, Bowen combines small, enigmatic, worn looking bits of wood, cloth, bone, wire and other substances, all in drab earth tones. The materials lose their original character entirely, to take on new context and new life. One little piece of wood turns a corner, sheltering a ball with holes that make it appear wounded. In another work, a mysterious wrapped shape hangs on the end of a stick, like the pendulum of a clock. In still another, a long and lean piece of bone points optimistically upward.