

EDITH NEWHALL

GALLERIES

"Art" by Thomas Hine and "Galleries" by Edith Newhall appear in alternating weeks

A teacher gets her due

Rochelle Toner, longtime Tyler School of Art faculty member, produced works in her spare time.

Rochelle Toner has been a familiar figure among the faculty and students at Temple University's Tyler School of Art since she began teaching there in 1972. She served as the school's dean from 1989 to 2002 and is now a professor emeritus. But the art she produced in her spare time remained largely unknown.

In fact, Toner, who has an M.F.A. in painting and printing, among other degrees, was quietly making prints (and later, watercolors and collages) on the third floor of her Northern Liberties house and exhibiting them in national and regional exhibitions.

Even so — and perhaps unintentionally abetted by her 2015 solo show at Philadelphia's Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, known for its commitment to self-taught art, with which Toner's obsessively made work could be compared — Toner had acquired a kind of outsider status in Philadelphia's art world. Her inclusion in curator Judith Tannenbaum's display for the brilliant 2016 send-up of an art fair, "Unlisted," in Kensington's Icebox Project Space was a revelation to those who'd never seen her work.

Now, finally, Toner is getting mainstream recognition, in the Print Center's mesmerizing survey "Rochelle Toner: Tying a Knot in a Cherry Stem," organized by the Print Center's former curator John Caperton.

Toner's watercolors and collages from the last decade are the show's main focus, their evolution somewhat explained by a



"Tease" (2010) by Rochelle Toner.

selection of her etchings from the 1970s and arrangements of objects drawn from her personal collections. Tannenbaum's essay for the show's brochure is indispensable.

It's an interesting trajectory. The scenes in Toner's early black-and-white intaglio prints are surreal, mostly invented, and unrelentingly ominous, a cross between Sue Coe and Giorgio de Chirico.

Front and center, in what appears to be a kitchen in *Contents Under Pressure* (1972), is a cooking pot full of pointy objects. It's surrounded by sharp spikes, above which hang a row of pipes from which gloves that resemble animal legs (or vice versa)

dangle unappetizingly. *Stone Enclosure with a Ramulose Border* (1977) offers a view of a landscape and a mysterious space enclosed by stone walls as seen from indoors. Midway between the exterior and interior spaces, knives float in the air, pointing down. Looking at these fraught images, you can't help but wonder whether Toner was channeling the mind-set of a woman frustrated by her domestic role.

The objects Toner collects have strong, idiosyncratic shapes: shells and seed pods, antique sheep shears, and "travelers," tools used for measuring metal for barrel hoop making. Echoes of all of them

reverberate in her work.

Toner took up watercolor as a medium in 1989 and her switch from monochromatic etchings to saturated color and fluid paint have clearly allowed a more playful way of working. Her images became (and still are) entirely abstract, rendered in Lifesavers hues. Tannenbaum says Toner began making collages in 2015 "to mix things up and try something new." Her collages of female figures cut from magazines and arranged in jarring compositions — some figures are formed from several different body parts — slightly recall surrealist Hans Bellmer's photographs of his life-size dolls, but they're humorous, not creepy. Another series, collage drawings that Toner began this year on antique natural science illustrations from the 1873 U.S. Geological Survey of the Territorie depict Toner's drawings of patterns over illustrations of bones and skeletons of animals and geological formations.

Looking at this exhibition, on the Print Center's second floor, I'm reminded of other artists who taught for most of their careers — Bill Walton, in particular, who had a posthumous show in this same space — and rethinking the adage that artists who teach will never have successful careers. To me, success looks like Toner's hard-won, genuinely personal art.

Print Center, 1614 Latimer St., 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. 215-735-6090 or www.printcenter.org. Through November 10.

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In Philadelphia galleries: A former Temple dean gets her close-up

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Edith Newhall



PRINT CENTER

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