

# LEAVING LOCKDOWN BEHIND

## FRAN BULL'S MILLION LINE ODYSSEY AT MITCHELL • GIDDINGS

As an older generation of trendsetters thins out, artists who have defied conventional classifications come to the forefront. One such person is Vermont artist Fran Bull, a participant in the Photorealist movement through the early 1980s who exhibited at the Louis Meisel Gallery in New York City. Her painstaking acrylics and watercolors embellished found images of zebras, storks and monarch butterflies in watery reflections. But Bull wasn't content with mastery of a single style. In her late 40s, she left the New York fast track for a more personal, multidisciplinary journey.

From then on, Bull's painting style expanded into exuberant fluid abstraction on paper and canvas, painted plaster reliefs, sculpture and multi-room installations, all enriched with poetry and philosophy.

Later in life, her large-scale etchings, paintings and dimensional work started traveling widely to galleries and museums in Italy and Spain, including LOA Gallery in Milan. A book of etchings is in the permanent collection of the Biblioteca Nacional de Cataluña in Barcelona. She showed at the Venice Biennale in 2017 and 2019.

Vermont gallerist Petria Mitchell offered Bull a retrospective last September at Brattleboro's Mitchell • Giddings Fine Arts that is being followed by a return engagement this May. The brilliantly pigmented abstract acrylics in "Space: an odyssey," all painted since January 2024, are a supernova that will literally overflow into a satellite site across the street. Inspired by the James Webb Telescope's probing of intergalactic space, the series develops a fantasia on the births of galaxies from a purportedly human perspective.

Each work develops its own emphasis on the themes of boundaries and boundedness, managing edges between layered interiors, no-man's lands and outer frames with a subtlety that foregrounds the unique character of each

### FEATURED ARTIST

**FRAN BULL: SPACE: AN ODYSSEY**

**MITCHELL • GIDDINGS FINE ARTS**

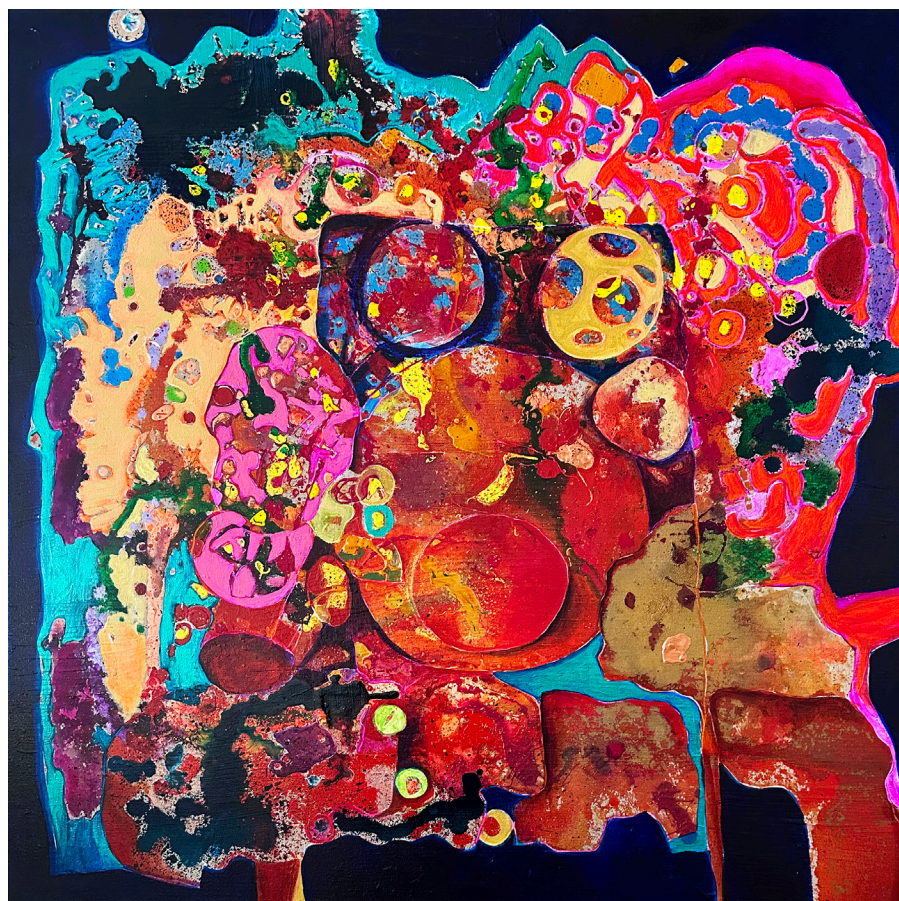
181-183 MAIN STREET  
BRATTLEBORO,  
VERMONT

**MAY 18 THROUGH  
JUNE 30**

Fran Bull, *City of Clouds*, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 24". Photograph by Robert Black.



Fran Bull, *Retablo*, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 36". Photograph by Robert Black.





work. In “Red Light,” a scarlet mantle isolates an area of white protoplasm speckled with dots and disk-like inclusions. From its billious depths a dark rocket erupts and shoots outward as though piercing a layer of armor to reach the brilliant exterior. “Zodiac,” a work of similar size, is girdled by a more muted red band that encases a teeming mass of orange and yellow orbs, red blobs and fuchsia nuggets. These seem to be on more peaceable terms with their surrounding territory.

In admiration of her creative output over the last 15 years, I asked Bull about the connections between the “odyssey” series and its precursors. Bull’s liquified abstractions first gained traction in the early 1990s. Having jettisoned the optical rigors of Photorealism, she began to cultivate a greater attunement to the feminine and maternal body. A “dark night of the soul” prodded an explosion of new forms: Watery, black, ink-infused drawings spreading outward on drenched white paper.

Strengthened by Jungian insights, Bull worked on a more liberated scale and discovered greater material possibilities in paint. Her “Magdalene Cycle,” a dozen acrylic paintings 96 inches in height, melded abstraction with hidden archetypal female references. Artist, curator and Castleton University professor emeritus Bill Ramage has reconstituted the series in a display at The Hub CoWorks in Rutland, Vermont.


Around 2000, her curiosity about crenelated surfaces led her to apply paint over thick Venetian plaster. Bull’s forms and colors lifted off the canvas plane to engage more immediately with the viewer. Her further forays into etching and sculpture generated even more ambitious installations. But in March 2020 the world’s character changed.

During the social vacuum imposed by the Covid lock-down, Bull was living in her studio in an open pasture in Brandon, Vermont. Widespread fears of infection made it impossible to predict when and whether she might exhibit the sculptural installation she was in the midst of completing. The conditions of the pandemic required emotional and physical adaptations leading her to contract her efforts into a more personal, contemplative space.

In this period, Bull turned to ultrafine Sharpie markers and began filling a seven-by-five-inch sketchbook with obsessive fine-line fantasies. She carved out a terrain of repetitive parallel lines, whose curves and ripples revealed shallow interiors compressed much like her immediate surroundings. Bull sensed a new, effortless way of sliding across a surface. “It felt like crochet.” Imagery of densely-peopled protective spaces streamed through her mind. Patterned tree-bark embracing a magic carpet, a Noah’s Ark woven from basketry, and a sleepless woman swaddled in eiderdown contrasted with a solitary woman clutching a letter in a windswept pasture.



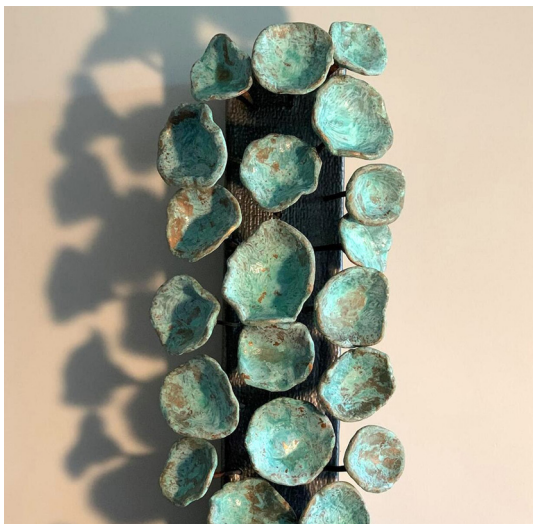
Fran Bull at Work in Studio in Brandon, Vermont, 2024. Photograph by Robert Black.



**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN ARTISTS, INC**

Massachusetts Chapter • [www.NAWAMA.org](http://www.NAWAMA.org)

sponsored by **artscope**



*Coterie (detail), Cindy Journey*

Apply at [thenawa.org](http://thenawa.org) by 3/15 and 9/15 of each year. NAWAMA Artists exhibit at Cotuit Center For the Arts, Multicultural Arts Center, Berkshire Art Museum, URI Providence Campus Gallery, Fountain Street Gallery, SoWa Art & Design District, Gallery at Atlantic Wharf, Seaport, RAA&Museum, Hefler Visiting Artist Gallery, The Vendue Art Hotel, The Art Complex, JL HQ, Newbury St.



"I drew the inner life of quarantine, of what I was reading or remembering," said Bull. "I drew someone sleeping in the caves of the ancient Greeks." A prolific writer, she wrote poetry in this period as well.

The following year Bull published selections from these poems and images in the book "Coronaworks2021."

Subsequently, with lockdown behind her, her personal freedom and her linear explorations began to blossom. In a newly emerging series, "One Million Lines," her Sharpie found more play in four-foot canvases. While she raced against deteriorating vision, her fine lines and intricate furrows gained territory and complexity. Originally monochrome forms became suffused with color. Bull swung further and further from her cramped technique. She even made large paintings with brooms, from which she later scaled back. But the hunger for color persisted.

The artist's most recent "neon" abstractions reveal the resurgence of inner forces suppressed during Covid's long confinement. Bull describes the process that supplanted Sharpie in the "odyssey" paintings. At the beginning she pours and splatters pools within pools using fluid acrylic paints of varying viscosities. "In the main, they are flat," said Bull. "Not 'painterly,' not impasto. I just lay down what paint I need for an area. There are some thick areas from that initial splashdown, almost like raised scars intermittently. I use a number of pearlescent paints, so the surfaces are by turns flat and shiny. These surfaces are the result of simply using a brush with relatively thick paint applied to the surface."

But while the textures are restrained, the chroma is jubilant. Bull explained, "The color is highly saturated, and consciously chosen to afford each color the opportunity to shine to its maximum as it interacts, lies beside, another. I use all the colors in the spectrum."

Working at the limits of her material and her gifts, Bull pushes beyond private chaos and despair to claim her freedom. Mindful that her personal trajectory on earth also has limits, she expresses hope in her Covid-era lines that some trace of her passing might persist long enough to provide pleasure for others.

Bull's 2021 poem "In My Next Life" from the "Coronaworks2021" series reads:

in my next life  
I want to be a path  
in the forest.  
a trail of fallen leaves  
a source of delight  
for all who stroll  
as I change  
from bright red and yellow  
to innumerable shades  
of raw sienna  
burnt umber  
Payne's gray  
moss green  
and Carbon black.

The opening reception for "Fran Bull: SPACE: an odyssey" takes place on Saturday, May 18 from 5-7 p.m. Bull will give an artist talk on Saturday, June 8 from 4-6 p.m.

**Elizabeth Michelman**



Fran Bull, *Red Light*, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 40" x 30" Photograph by Robert Black.