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VISUAL ARTS

Now at Hunterdon Art Museum: The bold, annual Claybash and other equally notable exhibits

Written By TRIS McCALL • July 30, 2026

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Bascha Mon's early paintings are patient. Despite the size of some of her canvases, they speak in a modest, measured voice. Her colors are soft: watery turquoise, cosmetic-case pink, the light green of spring foliage. Areas of pigment ebb into other regions. Shapes tap politely at the corners of the frames. Her pieces look rain-washed and weathered, irrigated thoughtfully with tone, texture and hue. They are as lovely as a field just before the bloom.

In other words, Mon often makes the kind of art that a viewer might admire for a few moments at a gallery before her attention is diverted by bossier pieces nearby. Even a painting as wide and welcoming as her "Pushcart Bazaar" never shouts for attention.



"Pushcart Bazaar," by Bascha Mon, can be seen at The Hunterdon Art Museum.



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completed almost a half-century ago. On the other wall, we encounter more recent works in gouache and pencil on paper. These are brighter, more vigorous and more spontaneous, but they share with the older pieces a certain reticence. Mon doesn't want cursory engagement. If you aren't willing to stand there and look for a while, she is content to let you go.

You would be making a mistake. These understated works reward engagement. Mon is extremely clever about her use of color. Her combinations aren't necessarily designed to sear your eyeballs — even in her vibrant recent work, she doesn't go in for extreme contrast — but there is nothing murky or uncertain about her gentle juxtapositions. Instead, she uses gradation and tonal likeness to guide your gaze toward the emotional core of her paintings.

"First Snow," a recent gouache, looks at first like a simple play of wallpaper pink and earthy green, but there are scores of distinct color-mixes and gradations in the piece. Through color and the rhythm of her strokes, she leads us up stepladders of parallel lines before plunging us into a whirlpool of green circles at the painting's lower right. What appears to be passive and pretty is quickly revealed to be full of action, and more turbulent than it initially seemed.



"First Snow," by Bascha Mon.

Similarly, Mon punched up the pastels in her early paintings by mixing her oils with perlite, a granular volcanic glass. This may account for the slow-dawning lustrousness of the surfaces, the stone-like weight of the images, and the slight but noticeable sense of danger that radiates from all of her work. In "But Mother, It's Perfectly Safe ...," we are on a city street that appears to be lit by a distant morning sun. There is a wide open door in the foreground, but it is hard to tell what is lurking behind the jamb. "A Secret Place" could be an attic scene with an open book, a mattress and an angled roof; regardless, it feels tight, furtive and tucked away from a threat. The artist has gotten a brownish color field in the foreground to resemble a worn old rug by scoring it with parallel lines. It looks like she has run a comb over the canvas.

Perlite is sturdy stuff with many industrial applications. It is also extensively used in gardening. Its presence helps new plants take root in old soil. Thus, it is meaningful that Mon, who grew up in the long-gone Jewish neighborhoods of Newark's Third Ward, incorporates perlite into place-based paintings that often resemble landscapes. Her "Prince Street Series" ("Pushcart Bazaar," the standout of this show, is one of them) alludes to a part of the city that was devastated during the civil unrest of the 1960s. Very little of the streetscape of Mon's childhood remains. "Pushcart," painted a decade after the Third Ward was torn apart, acknowledges her awareness of things shattered, and also hints at her hope for rebirth.

Bascha Mon isn't the only one at the Museum who is using sharp-edged materials to make sociological points. HAM has given the side gallery on the second floor to **Valerie Huhn**, one of the most talented, self-possessed and original artists currently working in The Garden State. The Flemington resident has won acclaim and respect for her three-dimensional pieces that investigate identity, policing, authorial control and the emotional dynamics of resistance. A typical Huhn piece literally has her fingerprints all over it: She will dip her digits in glitter-saturated ink of different colors, press them against clear acetate, punch them out, affix the plastic circles to a pin, and



"Fingerprint Pinned Racing Spikes," by Valerie Huhn.



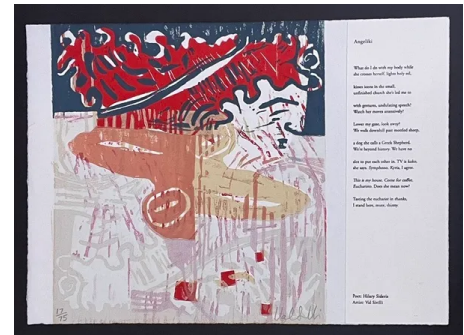
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In some of her most affecting pieces, Huhn forgoes the plastic and pins and presses her inked fingers directly on a tall sheet of paper. One of these tapestries hangs in "The Wound Is the Place Where the Light Enters You," her Hunterdon Art Museum show, and it feels like a reclamation of a mark of individual identity from the justice system that uses fingerprints for surveillance. But the heart of this affecting installation is the series of books written by African-Americans, all censored or otherwise controversial, open to a pivotal page and stuck with scores of fingerprint-stickpins.

Some of these volumes rest on wooden swings suspended from the gallery ceiling by chains. As nothing escapes Huhn's penetrating gaze, she drives pins in crisscross patterns through the links. Others seem to float, suspended in air, in clear boxes resting on the windowsills. The artist is testifying to the effects of these books on her, but she also has something to say about the resilience of their authors, and the indelible, indestructible ideas found within their bindings.

Books and the printed page have always been associated with anti-establishment politics. Many fans of the written word associate the decline of print with the rise of oppression. (Reasonably so, in my opinion). Consequently, mischievous characters have lately taken to the small printing press with enthusiasm and an unbound will to provoke. **The Steamroller Group**, a five-woman indie printmaking collective, has squeezed out enough broadsides to fill a tome they are calling "Uncharted Territories," and The Hunterdon Art Museum has turned over the top floor for an exhibition of its pages in frames on the wall. The book matches 19 poems to individual prints, each fashioned by a different artist. Some of the poetry is iffy, but the printed interpretations are a delight.



Hilary Sideris' poem "Angeliki," accompanied by Val Sivilli's artwork.

When the writing is good — when the handshake between poetry and pigment is firm — the prints elevate the words and deepen their significance. Elvis Alves' ode to Barbados in its bustling, traffic-jammy glory is paired with Berendina Buist's starry linocut of a heavy-lidded Bajan woman who may be the spirit of the island, or maybe just someone you would be lucky to meet on your next visit to The Antilles. "Chionophile," an elliptical verse by Dave Bonta, is matched with an all-white debossment by Joy Kreves and Ivia Sky Yavelow, and Alexander Booth's stupefied one-line love letter to the sea gets a wave-kissed golden circle from Charles Beneke. Most evocative of all is William Contino's odd, blasted landscape, complete with huge wire-cage structures casting warped shadows on the mountains. It is the visual accompaniment to "My Mind's Fogged In," Lynne Shapiro's terse poem of 10 unrhymed couplets. As the writer attempts to gather and pin down her thoughts, the printmaker provides a depiction of the landscape in which the chase occurs and, tacitly, tells us how difficult it is likely to be.

But what about the museum's main event: the experimental ceramics show that takes over the second floor each summer? I can report that this year's **Claybash** is, once again, a rewarding experience and a bold display of imagination, even if it isn't quite as dazzling as prior versions have been. The 2026 contestants (the Claybash is a juried show) foreground beauty and balance rather than flights of fancy, and many of the best pieces on view are small, modest ones. Some prior Claybash winners looked like they could be dropped from a plane and they wouldn't shatter; this year's standouts look fragile, unprotected and un-reinforced, and maybe even endangered.

Kai Fukunaga, for instance, graces us with "A Container for My Sorrow," a pear-sized vase made of tiny overlapping dollops of clay. The slate gray vessel has the delicacy of a Fabergé egg, and engenders the same sort of protective feelings. Sneeze, or look at it funny, and it might come apart. Its near weightlessness contributes to its unearthly beauty.



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delicious shakiness of the structure.

The wizardly Louise Wheeler, the state's most audacious tile-layer, constructs a thin drape out of ceramic pieces tied together to create the illusion of a stack of cubes; Lisa River Schenkelberg spikes up the show with a twisting stoneware spire at once suggestive of a desiccated shell, a closed tulip, and the brittle fossilized ribcage of some ovoid beast.

None of these artists walked away with first prize. The ribbon went to a rising star: Sophie Gagliardi, a sculptor who makes clay statues of animals that are both fantastic and realistic. Her triple-headed swan with braided necks emerging from a glossy-winged torso caused a sensation when she debuted it at New Jersey City University a few years ago. In the summer of 2026, it had the same effect on juror Angelik Vizcarrondo-Laboy. It is easy to see why this gorgeous mutant migrated all the way to Clinton from the swamps of Hudson County.

Beautiful aberrations of all sorts are celebrated in these Hunterdon hills. It has come to roost in a house of nonconformity. If you are an oddball, too, you would do well to follow its lead.

"Bascha Mon: Mindscapes," "Valerie Huhn: The Wound Is the Place Where the Light Enters You," "Steamroller Group: Uncharted Territories" and "Claybash" will all run through Sept. 6; visit hunterdonartmuseum.org.



Lisa River Schenkelberg's "Time Becomes a Loop."



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