

GALLERIES | CATE MCQUAID

Paying tribute to a Fort Point pioneer



“Cluster of Twelve” is among the works by the late artist Paola Savarino on display at Gallery at 249 A Street.

By **Cate McQuaid** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 14, 2017

Gallery at 249 A Street ushers out Paola Savarino with a bang. The painter died last March, of respiratory failure, at 72. She was a cofounder of Fort Point Arts Community, and among the pioneering artists to turn South Boston commercial buildings into live/work spaces in the 1980s.

“We were all living down here illegally. We couldn’t vote, we couldn’t get parking stickers, we were in constant fear of eviction,” says her son, Tony Savarino.

FPAC fought for proper zoning and developed housing, and artists moved into 249 A Street in 1984. “She went to City Hall to get her first South Boston parking sticker, and she was crying she was so happy,” Tony says.

Her building’s gallery celebrates Savarino with a show of her bead-encrusted abstractions from the late 1980s and early ’90s. The artist, a Tibetan Buddhist, later made encaustic Buddhas simmering with color. Toward the end of her life, she combined the two aesthetics; in a remarkable late painting not in this show, the Buddha appears evanescent – aptly ungraspable – beneath a crusty coat.

These early works don’t evince that painting’s sophisticated balance of assertion and surrender. They are, rather, all manic assertion: Exuberant or bristling, wildly expressive. Large works, such as “Flowers of Evil,” wheel, pop, and sparkle. Smaller works, arrayed in a grid by co-curator Duane Lucia, gain nuance through their juxtapositions, but there is not a lot of quiet or space.

Savarino found both, it appears, after health problems led her to meditation. For one of her last projects, she partnered with painter

Domingo Barreres to design a reclining Buddha mural for a neighborhood parking lot. It didn’t come to be, but for this show’s opening Barreres broke the image down into a grid and gave each square to a friend of Savarino’s to complete. They brought the tiles to the opening. For one night, they put Paola’s Buddha together. It was a perfect marriage of art and community.

PAOLA SAVARINO: Bejeweled

At Gallery at 249 A Street, 249 A St., through Sept. 30. 617-416-0718, www.galleryeastnetwork.com/paola-savarino

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STEVE MARSEL

Paola Savarino.