

For this artist, traffic cones stand for our struggles

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, Updated July 15, 2021, 12:00 p.m.



Susan Jane Belton's "Over Cautious." Susan Jane Belton/Howard Yezerski Gallery

When the pandemic hit, painter Susan Jane Belton took to the streets, walking for recreation. The commercial development outside her South End studio had halted, and orange traffic cones and yellow caution tape became more permanent ornaments. She began to see them as subjects for her work.

For years Belton painted disposable coffee cups, rendering crisp logos in luscious strokes on cardboard and Styrofoam cups singly, in groups, or in overwhelming piles. Those works jauntily pry into brand loyalty, eco-consciousness, and the comforting ritual of a morning brew.

Belton is a wry observer of life. The cups, in many ways, became stand-ins for us all, and so here do traffic cones, stanchions, and hydrants. Her cheeky titles reflect that anthropomorphism — hydrants have apt titles such as "Dachshund" and "Buck Rogers" — and the mad scramble we underwent to

adapt to a new reality.



Ribbons upon ribbons of caution tape loop around stanchions in "Over Cautious," cordoning off something beyond our sight. Space is indeterminate; there's no sidewalk, no horizon line, just a sea of sun-drenched beige — suggesting a never-ending, "Waiting for Godot" moment for these bound up stanchions, only they're anticipating the worst.

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"Two Down" captures four cones circling a utility pole like sentries. Two have fallen, as if exhausted. But Belton's easy paint-handling and tones belie the existential story of vigilance, confinement, and fatigue she tells. Smudges and streaks ground us in the sumptuousness of paint. The sun always shines, and dabbed highlights burst off surfaces. Shadows twirl and stretch. Indeed, the shadows in "Over Cautious" dance, as if all that cooped-up energy must be released.



The artist painted "Call Box" in 2018; it's the work that first pointed her outdoors. It depicts the corner of Albany and Dedham streets in a yummy shimmer. A rear-view mirror reflects a grayish car door, but squiggles and dashes of paint and a pitched composition give it intrigue and oomph.

Painting is a way to imbue something static with life. Under COVID restrictions, we were stuck in place. Belton's response was to pick up a paintbrush. She painted as a practice to stay sane, and maybe she needed to find hope, and to share it.

SUSAN JANE BELTON: PLAYING IN TRAFFIC

At Howard Yezerski Gallery, 460 Harrison Ave., through Aug. 7. 617-262-0550, www.howardyezerski.com

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