

Pair finds noble living in a materials world

By LARRY PARNASS
Staff Writer

NORTHAMPTON — A table on a porch sits shrouded in snow. A reader reaches for a shelved volume in a Whately bookshop. A farm boy lies atop his resting cow. Swimmers stroke their way, partly submerged, across a pool.

In alternating order, those are elements depicted in photographs by Genevieve Babin (the porch, the boy) and in sculptures by Harriet Diamond. The longtime friends are using a shared exhibit this month at Forbes Library to express how thoroughly, and singularly, humans invest themselves in their surroundings.

ART REVIEW

Rather than segregate their work into separate halves of the gallery, Diamond and Babin are showing images and three-dimensional figures as a single exhibit, "Distilled."

They succeed in finding fresh edges from both art forms that can nestle together here. They warm the hearth for one another.

Both women seek to show the richness that can lie hidden in routine, or, as Babin puts it, to shuck off indifference to the beauty of everyday life.

Diamond said Monday she believes attempts like this falter when artists try too hard to line



Harriet Diamond's painted ceramic sculpture titled "Horse Pull at the Cummington Fair" is part of the exhibit "Distilled," at the Hosmer Gallery of the Forbes Library in Northampton. The exhibit is a collaboration with photographs by Genevieve Babin. It runs through Sunday. For information call (413)587-1013.

up what's obviously similar. She and Babin looked instead for subtle links.

"I feel like our sensibilities are very close," Diamond said.

As they wished, the connections in "Distilled" hatch out of unexpected places, some straightforward, others only to be found by visitors who walk

the exhibit, let time pass and keep their eyes open.

I found a relatively obvious link in the pairing, across a section of floor, of Babin's photograph of the boy lying on his cow with Diamond's large table-mounted scene from the Cummington Fair.

The sculpture uses painted

terra cotta figures of man, beast and machine to recreate the fair's pulling pit. The grandstand is represented by a little wall of color, blurred to represent faces and bodies. That piece is headed, after the show ends Saturday, to its new owner in California.

The Forbes exhibit includes two of Diamond's newest pieces,

a busy indoor swimming pool and an antiquarian bookshop in Whately. Both scenes are as social as the fair, and as rich with implied story.

Elsewhere in the exhibit, the artists reach in unison to express a respect for literature — in a bookshop scene by Diamond and in a photograph by Babin of a girl reading. They also placed two tributes to music — a cellist's practice by Diamond and a portrait of a young male guitarist by Babin — in close association.

As it should be, the artists' pieces both stand alone and join together. They spur contemplation of what lies all around, in prosaic scenes alive with human moments.

The union seems to elongate time. Babin's photographs stop a moment, while Diamond's three-dimensional scenes bracket not just instances, but clutches of minutes.

After long working in a traditional darkroom, Babin says she is now striving to obtain richness from digital printing. She developed an allergy to the silver gelatin process that compelled her to find a new way to work with film negatives.

She has reason to be pleased with the results.

Her "Piscine" is characteristically simple. A black tire tube floats in a pool, casting a shadow whose shape is warped by light's movement through water. The shadow becomes the tube's

looser cousin, humbled and acted upon in its lair beneath the surface.

Babin's portraits give us five right faces, slack with trust. "Chez Bart's," a pretty girl freckles and a nose ring look the photographer from under a spray of black bangs.

"Table En Hiver" puts a snow-topped table at the center. The table-in-winter title states itself so plainly it teases out more and there are glorious layers to find in so simple an image.

In the photograph, the center of a tabletop has held back that's sifted down to the sidewalk below. Beneath the table lies another snowy scene distinguished by the fact it contains slightly less snow. The difference, which an illustration might break many pencils trying to suggest, is a matter of nature's ability to render exactly what it wishes.

In interior scenes, Babin works closely at a ceramic sink, a cup and plate and at a round bed. The prints of men and women are everywhere, in positions that purposely embrace these dwellings, and quietly celebrate our presence.

"Distilled" remains on through Saturday at the Forbes Library gallery, whose hours are Tuesday, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., Wednesday, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., Thursday, 1 to 5 p.m. and Friday and Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.