

In “Memoirs: Green,” Olitski applies washes of sharp, poisonous greens, reds, and blacks to create a deep, atmospheric space reminiscent of J.M.W. Turner’s paintings. He smears floating orbs on top: Sunny, egg-yolk yellow, then imperial purple, like the sun’s shadow. Smaller, layered dabs of blue and pink to one side unexpectedly perk up the scene.

You can see the fervor of a finger-painter in pieces such as “Patutsky Embraced: Purple, Yellow, and White.” Here, the purple plays background to languid, looping drips of yellow and a meandering border. Inside, a frosting-thick white orb bounces above luscious smears of orange and brown.

Olitski’s brilliant color sense, his passion for the zing provoked by one hue hitting another, and his joy in the messy expressiveness of paint infuse every painting with energy. Even his darker canvases reveal an insouciant delight in coming to be.

Scent of a painting

You can smell Elise Adibi’s exhibition at Harvard University’s Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study even before you enter the gallery. She has mixed essential plant oils with her oil paint. The place smells like a high-end spa, with floral and herbal scents mixing into a bright, soothing aura.



HEATHER LATHAM

Elise Adibi’s “Blue Tansy 1,” “Blue Tansy 2,” and “Blue Tansy 3.”

It powerfully alters the viewing experience. I was contemplating an untitled painting aswirl with cobalt blue and white when a fresh wave of aroma swept by — an unexpected layer of meaning revealing itself.

Adibi offers paintings built on a tight graphite grid, and more expressionistic abstracts (with the grid evident beneath). The “Blue Tansy” grid paintings, each with certain squares systemically marked in shades of blue and scented with blue tansy, emphasize how even a regulated process makes way for the less controlled smudges of the artist’s hand.

The roiling abstracts revel, like Olitski’s paintings, in the potentials of the material: It mists, it shines; it grows opaque and foggy. In that blue “Untitled (Aromatherapy Painting),” the paint streams, seeps, and separates in a seething round. The image is at once spritely and destructive. It, too, carries the scent of blue tansy.

I went around the gallery sniffing the paintings. Up close, they smelled of oil paint, which makes the aromatherapy effect seem even more intangible. The suggestion that the paintings are not simply what you see, but what you otherwise sense, underlines the intimate, nuanced experience of engaging with any worthy work of art: Keep your senses open. Use your body as instrument of perception. You may be taken by surprise.

Gourds galore

Andrew Mowbray brings another of his intensely crafted, conceptually rigorous, sprawling projects to LaMontagne Gallery. For “Another Utopia,” Mowbray begins with the lagenaria gourd, which has been used as a vessel for thousands of years, and is also commonly used as a birdhouse.



Andrew Mowbray’s gourds in “Another Utopia.”