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# Regionalism and Contemporary Artists in Maine: Opportunities and Challenges

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# Regionalism and Contemporary Artists in Maine: Opportunities and Challenges

by George Kinghorn

In a 2002 essay “History + Resources = A Sense of Place,” Wendy Griswold asserts that “unlike many states, Maine has an unusually strong ‘sense of place,’ or cultural regionalism.” In no small part, Maine’s rich artistic history that includes art luminaries such as Thomas Cole, Frederic E. Church, Winslow Homer, John Marin, Andrew Wyeth, Berenice Abbott, Marsden Hartley, and scores of other important artists, contributes to this regionalism. This artistic tradition, rooted largely in the depiction of Maine’s diverse landscape, has defined Maine’s sense of place, and this is clearly evident in Maine’s visual art community and museums today. For many Maine artists and galleries this bold sense of regionalism is a boon. But for new generations of contemporary artists who are calling Maine home, this regionalist focus may be restrictive. After all, there’s a diversity of contemporary art styles, art media, and creative approaches being explored, and in our information-rich society, artists have the ability to stay in tune and be inspired by what’s happening in art markets all over the globe.

I had the pleasure of interviewing a few of Maine’s accomplished artists and a contemporary curator to discuss the notion of Maine’s regionalism and the challenges and opportunities of sustaining a career as a contemporary artist in Maine. We also explored the role Maine’s cultural institutions and commercial galleries play in creating new audiences and collectors of contemporary art.

***George Kinghorn:** Maine has a great sense of pride fueled, in part, by its rich history and natural beauty. Of course, there’s much to be proud of including the beautiful coastline, picturesque mountains, untouched lands, and the resilient attitude of its residents. There exists a sense of regionalism that is reflected in how many individuals view and promote visual art in the state. These strong feelings about Maine’s sense of place has prompted a lot of discussion among artists and others about the notion of what constitutes Maine art and how we define a Maine artist within the context of contemporary society.*

***Anna Hepler:** We need to define what we’re talking about in terms of regionalism. There are many regions here and not just one sense of place. I think we’re talking mainly about the tourist industry as it careens up and down the coast of Maine. This is more about the romance that people from away have about Maine; this dictates a kind of romance that’s evident in the art market.*

***GK:** Yes. For our purposes, I’m referring to a regionalism that comprises this romantic vision of Maine that is linked to the state’s artistic history. It encompasses not only the charm of coastal communities, but in my view, also the natural beauty of interior Maine extending to Mount Katahdin and our rural areas. Some Maine-based artists forthrightly assert “I’m a Maine artist,” while others find the label to be professionally confining. Do you think this regionalism and/or romanticized vision of Maine benefits or hinders contemporary artists working in Maine today?*

***Lauren Fensterstock:** I’ve lived here for 14 years. I consider myself a Maine artist and love living here, but being from Maine is not my primary identity. Does that mean that I have to make the content of my work about Maine? I find that I have a complex identity that is the result of many facets of my life. I think with any system of categorization, there’s simplification. What is problematic for me is that some exhibitions in Maine such as biennials and other shows are grounded in these categories or distinctions. These locally focused criteria may cut off possibilities for greater exchange and dialogue with the rest of the world.*

***Suzette McAvoy:** We recently hosted an interview at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (CMCA) with Deborah Weisgall, co-juror of the 2014 CMCA Biennial. Of course, the topic of “Who is a Maine artist?” as well as “What’s a Maine biennial supposed to be?” came up. One attendee, who was an artist, took exception to the fact that artists who don’t live in Maine*



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**Philip Frey** works in painting and drawing. Frey lives and works in Sullivan, Maine.



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**Suzette McAvoy** is the executive director of the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockport, Maine.

year-round, are allowed to apply to the *CMCA Biennial*. My feeling is if we excluded artists who are seasonal Maine residents, we would not truly be reflective of what contemporary art in Maine is at the present. Interestingly, this topic of what defines a Maine artist also came up in a discussion at the University of New England in conjunction with their *Maine Women Pioneers* exhibitions.

**GK:** *At one point was an artist's year-round residency a criterion for the CMCA Biennial?*

**SM:** No, we've always defined our mission as showing artists with strong ties to Maine. There are so many artists who don't necessarily live here year around, but have ties to Maine. They may not be representing Maine in their work, but their art is influenced by a deep connection to Maine. In the recent biennial, there's conceptual art, installation, video, and traditional painting. Works based on nature is a common thread; this may be the Maine connection.

**Philip Frey:** The question that I've been pondering the last couple of years is: If a Maine artist is producing works with Maine subject matter or that may be labeled "Maine art," can they be taken seriously in art markets outside the state?

**AH:** I'm not interested in being labeled anything. We need to distinguish between what the market asks and needs in order to sell and as a way to secure its audiences,

versus what we experience as artists living here. There is a prejudice that regionalism is associated with folk art and craft; it's a different market altogether. If regionalism is a cloak an artist wears for whatever reason, it will inevitably exist as a prejudice in terms of trying to shift work from a regional market to an urban and international one.

**GK:** *Without doubt, Maine has a certain mystique. This beautiful terrain has inspired and been the subject of works by so many artists throughout history. As visual art has evolved to encompass so many styles, media, and diverse approaches, the notion of the Maine artist or Maine art, particularly painting, is still real. We may agree that this viewpoint is outdated, but there's this romanticized notion of Maine and that lures many visitors (including art consumers) to the state.*

**SM:** The image of the artist standing at an easel on the rugged coastline with crashing surf is for many still the perception of the Maine artist. I think now there's a division between artists who embrace Maine as a subject matter and artists who work in Maine. I think it's easier for those artists who embrace Maine as a subject matter in their art to accept themselves being termed or labeled a Maine artist. But there are so many artists here who don't use Maine as a subject matter such as artists producing abstract or conceptual work.

**AH:** It's part of the Maine brand. I mean as crass as that is, the artists have been a part of the branding of the state.

That gets us right back to tourism and the whole romantic legacy that intensified in the 1920s. People started to build those lovely fancy houses along the coast. There was a need to uphold the whole idea of this romantic other place, this getaway that is so beautiful that artists want to come and paint the coast and live here. I think that the primary market here is a tourist collection market and that's the art that's being financially supported. At least that's the art that is leaving Maine.

**LF:** I think it's possible to build an arts destination that transcends this regional notion. There are institutions in other places such as MASS MoCA [North Adams, Massachusetts] and Dia: Beacon [Beacon, New York] that have successfully accomplished this; there's the potential of building some other economy around this broader idea.

**AH:** Like it or not, I think artists and the people who consume art are both perceived as a leisure class. People coming to Maine to relax from their other hectic lives are lumped together with this notion of independently wealthy artists. These artists have all this time to devote to philosophic and superficial pursuits and buy into that same culture. I think it's a pernicious cycle where these two elements are inextricably wedded to each other. There's the idea that objects of art can bring a similar leisure status, or the symbol of one, if you invest in them.

**PF:** Another aspect to consider is Maine's isolation. Portland's a big place, but travel not far outside the city and it's rural. Maine is an approachable place, but there's also ruggedness to the state. There's a close connection to nature, and that thread may run through a lot of work by Maine artists, even those who are abstract or more conceptual.

**LF:** If it is true that the art market here is fueled by people from away who will buy art here because they want to take a piece of Maine back with them, then the market will continue to favor things that in some ways explore Maine as a place.

**PF:** I took part in a Maine residency a couple years ago and experienced this odd confluence of things happening. You're in Maine, looking at Maine through all of the windows of my studio, and making art of these views. At one point, I was out painting on location, when a person came along and wanted to buy the painting that

I was working on. They're part of the leisure class and I was lumped right into the idea we're discussing: I'm not part of that class, but rather a working artist. In this instance, I'm looking at and painting this beautiful scene of an island. The collector is staying there for the summer, and he's looking at the same thing.

**SM:** So that person is buying into this particular vision of Maine.

**LF:** There are certainly many other narratives, but the Maine coastal landscape as a subject is so pervasive that it's sometimes difficult to exist outside of this. I don't think that a Maine venue has completely transcended this notion.

**GK:** *What do you feel are the challenges and opportunities of being a contemporary artist in Maine?*

**LF:** One of the challenges of being a contemporary artist in Maine is economics. You have to be able to make a living from your work and the reality is there's not a big market here. There are only a million people in this state and only a small percentage of them buy work. Also, there are a limited number of state or foundation grants in Maine. I think that Maine can't economically support all of the artists that we have. The artists have to reach out to larger markets. In a larger market, you're able to network with people from other larger markets. I think that when we only create opportunities for Maine artists to exhibit, and we don't bring in artists from other states, we have lost an opportunity to make connections that may boost Maine careers. Also, by bringing artists in, we raise the value of Maine as a place to exhibit and enhance the dialogue that's happening here.

**PF:** For me, it's just the reverse. I've been mostly selling here in this state through a handful of galleries, and there's plenty of work for a representational landscape painter. So the issue for me is that being a Maine artist may be a hindrance, particularly when trying to find representation outside of the state. Galleries outside of Maine may not necessarily want to carry works that appear to be regional in scope or of Maine subjects.

**SM:** The Maine galleries that are representing artists are not necessarily making connections for artists outside the state. There's a big burden today for artists to not only produce the work, but also to market themselves

outside the state and seek exhibition opportunities. We ask a lot of artists these days.

**GK:** *Most artists' income is derived from diverse sources. Many rely, to varying degrees, on sales of their artwork to sustain their creative practice. When you survey Maine's current commercial gallery landscape, are there adequate opportunities for you to sell your art here? Have you had greater success selling your works in markets outside of Maine?*

**SM:** Throughout the history of art in Maine the market has been primarily outside of the state. We now have institutions in Maine that are showing really professional-level exhibitions and artists, but the commercial market hasn't grown at that same level because the collector base still isn't there. While there may be more exhibiting opportunities, there are still not as many opportunities to sell works within the state.

**PF:** I would say 95 percent of my collectors are from out of state. They have second homes and come from the larger metropolitan areas. In a sense, the market is still outside of the state, and people are coming here to buy. Even with the museums and various galleries, I think it's still the case that the population of Maine is not going to be able to support all of the artists we have.

**LF:** At the moment, most of my income is derived from sales and supplemented by speaking engagements and occasional part-time teaching. I would say 98 percent of this is from outside of this state. Even though I've been able to build a reputation as an artist in Maine and exhibited my work widely here, I've never been able to establish a commercial market in Maine. I've had very few sales in Maine and never sold my larger, more involved pieces here.

**SM:** In some ways the label Maine artist is actually a boon to certain artists in terms of marketing their work. Some collectors only collect work that is by a Maine artist or portrays Maine subject matter. Even though an artist may have a broader audience and have produced work that encompasses other subjects or locales, some collectors want only their Maine work. It can be confining.

**LF:** I would like to bring this back to the economic needs of the artist. Much of my work is installation and

I can't afford to do a project unless there's a production budget. The larger projects I've completed have been outside of the state because these institutions and museums have more money available. This is essential for an artist to realize a bigger vision.

**AH:** Yes, these institutions are able to commission works and provide for a whole experience.

**LF:** A lot of art spaces in Portland have closed and some of the major commercial galleries are now gone. It will be curious to see, but I think Rockland is really going to be the center with the Farnsworth as the collecting institution and CMCA that will be able to take risks.

**GK:** *What role do Maine's visual arts institutions play in advancing contemporary art in the state? With regard to programming, do you think Maine's art museums are providing adequate opportunities to view contemporary art and is there a balance between Maine-based exhibitions and works produced by artists beyond our border?*

**SM:** I think it's a challenge for institutions in the state to get funding for exhibitions that are not Maine-focused. Some sponsors want to be seen as promoting and supporting this narrow definition of Maine. My goal is to exhibit a diversity of work that says "this is Maine today." Maine is full of all kinds of art and people these days.

**LF:** The role of Maine museums should not be to solely promote Maine artists. Just because I live in Maine, doesn't mean I'm not interested in other ideas and things from around the world. Whatever the subject matter of your work, I think Maine artists should stay engaged and aware of what's happening globally. It's always beneficial to see what else is happening.

**PF:** When I look at the Portland Museum of Art, sometimes I feel like it's really weighted towards the biggest names. In terms of exhibitions, the rest of the Maine artists aren't really represented there. There is, however, a chance for artists to be exposed in their biennial exhibition.

**SM:** For CMCA, our role is to provide a platform for exhibiting work that we feel is important and reflects the best of contemporary art produced in Maine. With our



new building we'll be able to provide more visibility for contemporary art produced in the state. We certainly want to add to the conversation in a way that expands the notion of art. It's about exposing the public and other artists in the state to the wide range of work being created throughout the state. Maine art can hold its own with any place in the country and it's important to get across that there's quality work being created here.

**GK:** *When I first arrived at the University of Maine Museum of Art [UMMA], I encountered a few individuals who were puzzled that the museum's focus was not exclusively Maine art. I explained that it has never been the mission of UMMA, and the majority of works in the collection are not by Maine-based artists or of Maine subject matter. I have always maintained that as an academic museum, focusing primarily on exhibiting and collecting works created since 1945, our mission is to introduce citizens including Maine artists to a diversity of creative approaches being explored by artists from all over the country. Also, it's important to place significant Maine artists within a larger and more global context and, I hope, through exhibiting at UMMA, their works will be introduced to larger art markets.*

**LF:** This is a conversation that I feel like I've had many times. It's interesting that when I travel to the Museum of Fine Art Boston, I don't expect to see Boston artists. Likewise, when I go to the Museum of Modern Art, I don't necessarily expect to see works by New York artists. The expectations placed on our art institutions with regard to this heavily weighted Maine focus seems to be much stronger here than in other states, and I feel it is damaging to the intellectual growth of our community.

**SM:** I think this particular conversation continues to happen in Maine because of the long history of artists being in the state and the disproportionate number of artists relative to the rest of the population. I think that programming has improved over the time that I've been in Maine. The museums are all doing more contemporary shows and featuring some contemporary Maine artists. Also, the Portland Museum of Art is acquiring and integrating more pieces by Maine artists into their collection. The more they can bring Maine artists into that continuum of American art; it will continue to break down those boundaries.

**LF:** It's not just about contemporary Maine art, but institutions such as Colby and Bowdoin that have more encyclopedic art collections.

**SM:** It's such a service to artists in Maine to be able to see these important works in the flesh and not have to travel outside the state. It's especially important that children growing up in Maine have the opportunity to be exposed to a range of art.

**GK:** *What is the curator's role in advancing the careers of contemporary artists in Maine? Have you had a beneficial or positive experience working with curators?*

**LF:** I think the most important thing that the curators can do is uphold a certain level of quality and engagement. Having curators who are aware of larger art trends and ideas internationally is important. Also, it's important to introduce Maine artists to what's happening across the globe and to set high standards for artists.

**SM:** Personally, one important role is nurturing the next generation. The CMCA offers a lot of educational programming for all ages. As an institution it's essential to expose young people in Maine to work that's being done in the state. Many of these children would typically not be exposed to any original artwork. Ultimately, we provide opportunities for engagement.

**AH:** Curators have a responsibility to remain open and curious. Also, I know there's a need for efficiency and curators are often pressed for time, but they should visit studios and find time for original research. Without the direct experience of visiting with artists, opportunities that present themselves such as exhibitions may be more linked to a popularity contest.

**PF:** The conversation that happens in a studio visit is so helpful. It gets me thinking about different viewpoints. The curator may come in to view the work, and they are looking at it within a larger context. The curator may point out something that I didn't see.

**LF:** Most of the time I'm alone in my room putting things together. When you're working on a big project with a curator, it's encouraging to have someone whom you respect invest in your work. Investing means having a deep look at your work and process. I think having the opportunity to have a deep conversation is important.

**AH:** To have someone champion some aspect of what you're doing is a huge benefit in terms of the affirmation. But I think that the greatest gift is a little nudge. In the best relationships, the curator can bring amazing insight to your work and a perspective that you haven't thought about. It's like seeing yourself for the first time or in a new way.

**GK:** *The whole process of organizing an exhibition is a collaboration between artist and curator. You're creating an experience together, addressing spatial concerns, discussing content, and considering the viewer experience.*

**SM:** Yes, there has to be a lot of trust on both sides. As a curator, the artists are trusting you to present their work in a truthful manner; they're trusting you to present it to the public in a way that is respectful. Likewise, the curator has to trust that the artist is going to come through with the work within the agreed upon time.

**GK:** *At the state level, do you feel that enough is being done to support visual artists? What are some of the challenges that exist?*

**SM:** One of the critical things is for the state government to embrace that the arts are a valuable resource for the state. Maine has probably contributed more than any other single state to the history of American art (short of New York City alone!), but no one from the state legislature or the governor's office seems to be speaking about it.

**PF:** This may be getting a little political, but when Judy Taylor's labor mural was removed, I wrote a letter to the *Bangor Daily News* and *Ellsworth American* and wanted to note how much the arts have brought to the state financially. When you take all of the creative industries, including the tech industry, it was in the billions of dollars. This was according to a study by the Maine Center for Business and Economic Research and the New England Environmental Finance Center at the University of Southern Maine, the creative economy in 2002 paid a total of \$2.5 billion in direct wages and \$200 million of which was in the arts and culture industries. I think we need to put pressure on the state government, individually and collectively, to point out that arts are a major contributor to our economy.

**LF:** There has been attention given to this idea of creative economy and arts as an economic engine. Within this equation, the emphasis is always on the income and benefit to service industries such as hotels and restaurants and never on the actual artists as professionals who also need to bring in revenue. I think agencies like the Maine Arts Commission need to advocate for artists as professionals.

**AH:** I was going to say that I think the current administration obviously doesn't value the arts much. The Maine Arts Commission has implemented some changes that have reduced funding for individual artists. The new granting policies and the small sums being awarded suggest a lack of trust in artists to produce something worthwhile. There are all these strings attached to grants. We are constantly proving, stating, and writing our own eloquent justifications for why we should exist.

**LF:** The new grant structure does not seem to acknowledge artists for excellence in research and production. It's about art in the service of socially acceptable goals. If art supports education, then it's legitimate. If art supports community building, then it's legitimate. But, art as a distinct field of intellectual research is not valued and promoted. It's often geared toward quantity of public engagement, rather than the quality of the research and innovation in the field.

**SM:** Art shouldn't have to justify itself by being something other than what it is. I'm all for artists' work that has an element of engagement, but only if that's genuinely what they do as their practice. An artist's solitary work in the studio should also be supported.

**LF:** I think that this is all part of a larger conservative social agenda that's infiltrating our politics and society. This agenda is anti-intellectual, anti-individual.

**SM:** The whole controversy started years ago with the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] and Mapplethorpe, and it's been a struggle ever since. There's a fear that if we give artists money to do their work, they're going to take advantage of the opportunity and make work that's controversial.

**LF:** There is so much political discourse right now about Maine's economy and the need for job creation. We have a social prejudice against artists and those who are

in creative professions. Many don't consider these legitimate jobs. If we change our attitude about artists as professionals, we can better engage the creative industries and their capacity to be economic contributors in the state. We have to get over these anti-intellectual or anti-individual prejudices.

**SM:** The other day, the governor of Massachusetts gave this great talk about how their state is supporting the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA). I thought: Wow! I would love that to happen in Maine. To have Maine's governor stand up and talk about supporting contemporary institutions, and arts and culture in general, would be great. It seems like the leadership is not fully embracing the state's history of the arts.

**PF:** I think part of the problem sometimes is that most people don't understand the basic value of art. There's a mystery in creating something by hand. Unlike other fields, art is not necessarily quantifiable. We can indeed show its economic impact on a graph or pie chart and we all know (or should know if we don't) of its more intangible yet profound effects: creative thinking and one way to open our hearts and minds to our innate qualities and the natural world around us. I think part of the job of curators, gallerists, and educators is to excite and educate people—to try and describe something in art that's indescribable. Also, there's this misconception that the arts are elitist. This is perhaps one factor that institutions and politicians are railing against.

**GK:** *This discussion will appear in a special issue of Maine Policy Review that explores the intersection of the arts and humanities with public policy. Do you have a specific policy suggestion that can improve the contemporary arts infrastructure in Maine?*

**AH:** I have a suggestion that is a precursor to policy: Many people involved in arts administration are themselves unsure about the value of arts and culture and struggle to defend it. As a result, the current trend for arts granting organizations is to fund efforts that engage the community with predetermined outcomes. This is an indicator of insecurity. What is needed through all levels of arts infrastructure is real conviction about the value of the arts and with it will come trust for the open-ended and necessary exploration that drives artistic innovation.

**LF:** I would encourage policymakers to develop opportunities that generate cultural trade between Maine and other states. By bringing out-of-state artists to Maine, we raise the profile of Maine as a national-level art scene (a place where artists from all over the country want to show and where collectors want to buy); we expose Maine artists to current trends (making their work relevant to a larger audience); and help Maine professionals to network with visiting colleagues (opening relationships to profitable new opportunities). By sending Maine art out of state, we introduce our artists to larger markets, bring new ideas back to Maine, and create diplomacy for all of Maine's cultural endeavors.

**PF:** The contemporary arts structure in Maine needs four things, all of which are interrelated: (1) recognition and promotion of its vital and far-reaching influence and intersection with our culture, businesses, and education system; (2) more financial support for individual artists to work on important projects that may not be specifically linked to education; (3) financial support for bringing curators and artists together to foster conversations, collaborations, and exhibitions; and (4) active promotion of Maine artists outside the state, creating conduits to museums, galleries, and other institutions and perhaps bringing an art fair (like Art Miami or Art Basel) to the state or create our own art fair. 🐟

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