

Art Review: Greenhut's biennial 'Portland Show' sets a standard

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By Daniel
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Greenhut Galleries' "Portland Show" has set a standard for biennials in Maine, offering a consistently excellent show.

It has never been a perfect show, and I don't like every work this year, but each selected artist is worthy of consideration.

ART REVIEW

WHAT: The 8th Biennial Portland Show, featuring the works of 50 Maine artists

WHERE: Greenhut Galleries, 146 Middle St., Portland

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday; through April 30

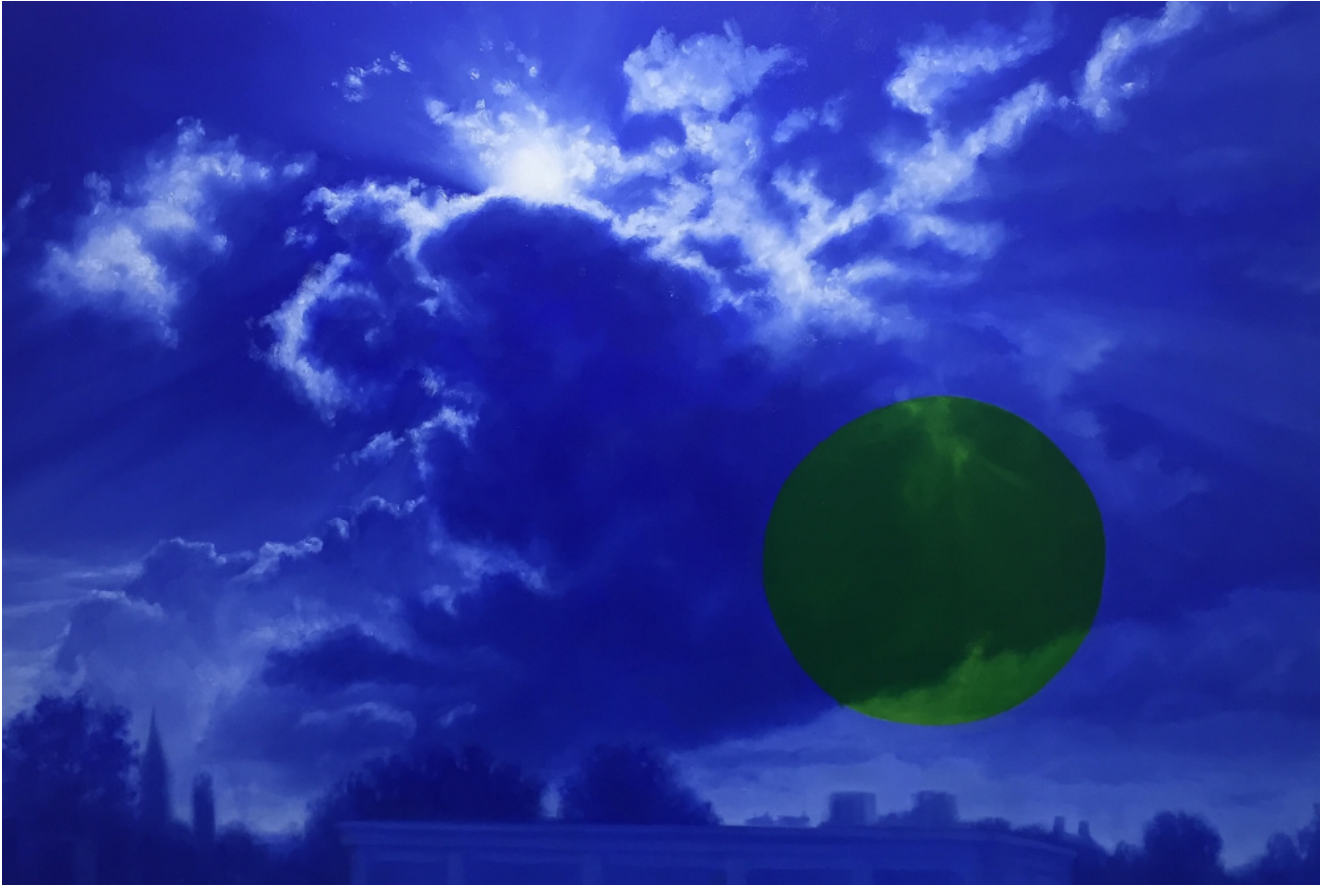
INFO: greenhutgalleries.com, 772-2693

Even the piece that appeals to me least, Chris Eaton's "5th Day Slow Rider," is impressive. It features a scene in cut paper and pencil drawing of onlookers and people on bikes. The craft and draftsmanship are excellent and the work clearly achieves its wild-and-crazy celebratory intent. It's dazzling and hysterical. It's just too jangly for me.

In numbers, this is a big show. Try to parse every piece, and this "Portland Show" becomes huge. Usually, curatorial themes facilitate our looking: We (lazily) check off how a piece is connected to the theme and then feel we understand it. But Greenhut's show sets up the artists, chosen well in advance, to make or select a piece for the show. So rather than safe and simple selection by the gallery, the artists are empowered to be their own curators. This doesn't always complicate the content, but enough of the artists seek to challenge the gallery and each other to make for a particularly rich viewing experience.

The work ranges greatly in style, content and approach. Ben Coombs' handsome blown glass lobster buoys greet you at the door and beyond them is Crystal Cawley's Mad Hatter's hat made of map scraps. Alice Spencer's quilt paintings take an unexpected close look at historic, local quilts. Eaton's eye-popping bicyclists pull your eye to a farther gallery. And Daniel Anselmi's unapologetically abstract collages clearly seek internal elegance instead of

someone else's story – a theme we could also ascribe to the works of Henry Wolyniec and Sandra Quinn among others. Maybe they aren't team players, but choosing to do their own thing works for all of these artists.



"Augur: West End," Robert Sullivan

Among the divergent works are plenty of compelling, clearly Portland anchors. C. Michael Lewis's hallucination-like high focus flat scene of a brick building's fire escape system achieves an extraordinary intensity of two-dimensional design, technical achievement and enamel-like surface. Marsha Donahue's urban scene (in oil instead of watercolor) is bifurcated both by a graffitied parking lot wall in the foreground and the late afternoon sun that blazes on the houses beyond the shade-blued wall.

Surprisingly few of the works feel predictable, but those that do, like Tina Ingraham's blue, brick, gray and white "Portland Pier Moorings," with its soft, woolly focus, and Jeff Bye's similarly sited "After Six," more than surpass a certain standard. The only genuine disappointment is Anne Lofquist's "Portland from Sheridan Street" – it's a fine painting but we saw it in the last Portland Show.



"Slip of Light," Philip Frey

Sub-themes appear spontaneously. I found myself caught up in an ongoing trove of night scenes led by Richard Wilson's witty little "Two Lights" (fireworks and then a French fry stand), Roy Germon's suite of four tiny street scenes and particularly the creamy blue "End of the Pier," Thomas Connolly's iconic portrait of the Hay Building, Lori Tremblay's "Time Keepers" that matches a clock face to the logic of a star gazer's sky, Chris Beneman's geometrically crisp "Working Waterfont" (both Tremblay and Beneman achieve deliciously taught surface textures), Tom Hall's mythically dark gaze through Congress Square across the bow of the Portland Museum of Art and, among others still, Alec Richardson's exquisitely blue, pink and lilac-lighted "Twilight on the Wharf."

Fans of great brush handlers should not miss this show. Colin Page is only getting better. His lobster boat at the wharf is a lesson in painting. Page's often frosting-thick marks in the middle of the scene jump in all directions at once, somehow managing an unforeseen choreographed harmony. And Page then awakens passages that shouldn't work, like the bright blue to dark green of the water at the lower left, to make them feel inevitable. Nearby is Germon's "Munjoy Hill" that speedily sweeps in from the wrestled-to-the-ground front right path to create an unusually cropped structure punctuated by an flickering passage of strokes at the top center peak of the hill.

Several works combine rich conceptual programs with particularly fine mark making. Ken Greenleaf's "The Weight of the Metal at Fort Gorges" is a marvel of data mining and design executed with the intelligence that belies the artist's foundation as a sculptor: It sweeps, pops, explains and then celebrates.



"Hay Building," Thomas Connolly

Daniel Minter's deft "Bay Side Window" handsomely incorporates 50 images within a warmly intriguing public-program art story.

Robert Sullivan's "Augur West End" held my fascination rapt. It is a blue monochrome scene of dazzling sun finding its way back through a passing cloud in an upward look over the tops of West End apartments. The perspective holds deeply onto the discourse of camera imagery: lens flares, single-point distortion and then color filter logic made clear by a large green circle on the right that only serves to color shift the clouds within it. It is highly unusual insofar as it challenges both from photography and painting perspectives. If photo

filters, the green might not be green, but yellow over the blue. The painting challenge most obviously comes in handling the values of the varied colors: In five seconds, I snapped a shot with my iPhone, switched it to black and white and found that Sullivan nailed it.

Finally, Philip Frey's "Slip of Light" is simply one of those paintings that looks like it fell off the brush. It's an urban scene of no particular note, but this only lets us better see the brushwork, which is about as good as it gets. (If, however, you unravel the composition from the yellow at the base of the statue, the scene spirals open with a dazzling structural brilliance; however, this takes a few passes.) Every stroke feels both alive and perfectly in its place. It's a new high water mark. Frey is an excellent painter, but "Slip of Light" feels inspired beyond the norm.



Courtesy of Greenhut Gallery
"The Working Waterfront," Chris Beneman

Is there "something for everyone" in this Portland Show? Probably not. But if you want to see an extraordinary cross-section of Maine painters taking on Maine themes, or if you just want to see a few great paintings by active artists, it doesn't get much better than this.

Freelance writer Daniel Kany is an art historian who lives in Cumberland. He can be contacted at:

Comments are not available on this story.