

Art review: Borne from a rich history, Maine photography shows continued strength in three coastal galleries

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By Daniel
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August 26,
2018

It wasn't that long ago that Eliot Porter led the charge for color photography to become its own field, changing everything. His brother, Fairfield, was not only a great painter but a muscular critic. His family's island in Maine, Great Spruce Head, became not only a point of importance but a simple reminder that place was a sort of key that could, potentially, unlock the future.

And it did.

ART REVIEW

WHAT: Todd Watts, Katherine Bradford, Sam Cady, Alan Bray & Susan Williams

WHERE: Caldbeck Gallery, 12 Elm St., Rockland

INFO: caldbeck.com

WHAT: Carver Hill Gallery

WHERE: 28 Bayview St., Camden

INFO: carverhillgallery.com

WHAT: Jeffery Becton, Linda Packard and others

WHERE: Courthouse Gallery, 6 Court St., Ellsworth

INFO: courthousegallery.com

Photography went far past what Alfred Steiglitz, the champion of photographic pictorialism, and his colleagues could have imagined. Steiglitz, of course, was so much more than photography. His gallery, 291, led the way for so many artists to become international leaders, many of which were to crystalize into the new image of Maine art. Marsden Hartley and John Marin, for example, weren't merely two Mainers he championed; they were giants in the making.

Looking back, and not merely limiting ourselves to the more obvious photo-oriented Maine artists, such as Berenice Abbott, Joyce Tennyson, Richard Estes, Paul Caponigro and William Wegman, Maine's ranks of photography-related artists has been rich.

But the key, however, to Steiglitz's pictorialism was a reverence for painting. In Maine, it was always about painting. The early artists holding cameras in their hands understood this: To be seen as art, photography had to take on painting. This was akin to the lesson that the first abstractionists got from Cubism: Legibility was everything. If a painting was legible as a painting, that was enough. Later, if a photograph was legible as art, that would be enough. And from that perspective, contemporary photography was born.



Jeffery Becton, "Caught Out," digital montage, 20.4 by 33 inches, at Courthouse Gallery.

But what does that look like now? The new stuff and the new spaces in Maine we're seeing this summer aren't simply doing what they had been doing before. Photography, while it isn't the only aspect, is very much part of the growing vision of Maine art.

COURTHOUSE GALLERY

Courthouse Gallery is a reasonably new gallery, but it's been ever-growing during the past few years. Not only does it feature many of Maine's freshest authors of traditional "Maine painting," such as Colin Page, Philip Frey and Linda Packard (whose Jon Imber-educated chops have now turned delectably abstract), but the gallery's newest space is filled with a major show of digitally-deep-dug photography by Jeffrey Becton. His current show goes

deep with images of the Maine coast as it might ebb and flow into our dreams. His “October Tide,” for example, features a lobster boat broadsiding the foreground, which we can only imagine is a lee shore worthy of the nastiest machinations of Scylla and Charybdis. As a seascape photographic image, it looks solid, even beautiful. But its inward bend lends a sense of succubus gravity that lirts towards us with a terrifying sense of doom.

Becton has proved himself to be a major power of compelling images. His “Caught Out” reminds us why. It’s a photo of a set of (rather trashy) cupboards that look like the wheelhouse of a fishing boat. Becton turns the image down and Photoshops in ocean water as though a view of a working boat in its final throes seen from the view of the crew. It’s terrifying. Yet the scene is imagined. There is no wheel or controls of a boat. It’s a scene nightmarishly dreamed – or, maybe, imagined by children playing. But Becton’s grown-up vision, so technically specific, won’t let us hand the image off to the childish or the playful. So the water rushes in on us, cold and deadly, and all we can do is hope to wake up.

CALDBECK GALLERY

Todd Watts’s photos at Caldbeck are a reminder that challenging photography is now finding a regular place in Maine’s best galleries during its most important seasons. Watts has been a stalwart of the Maine scene, but to see his work owning the ground floor of one of the state’s most prestigious galleries in August is notable. After all, Watts’s newest work is difficult and deeply creepy.



Katherine Bradford, "Fog Dive," 2018, acrylic on canvas, 11 by 14 inches, at Caldbeck Gallery.

It's no surprise that Caldbeck's upstairs is loaded with excellent and smartly accessible works by well-known painters. Alan Bray's quirky high-focus canvases, Katherine Bradford's deliciously color-deep paintings of bathers and divers, and Sam Cady's brilliant shape-driven drawings and canvases might comprise a small show, but one well-worth visiting. One might imagine that Susan Williams's lusciously-painted acetone-support landscapes that dot the upstairs gallery with their deliriously brushy beauty would be what most art dealers would put on the main, street-level gallery. Yet, Caldbeck gives us Watts, complicated, difficult and sometimes troubling.

From a curatorial standpoint, I have to give Caldbeck a big thumbs up for this move. Watts is a challenge for me, as I imagine he's going to be for many. And that's a good thing.



Alan Bray, "Spring House," 2018, casein on panel, 8 by 11 inches, at Caldbeck Gallery.

CARVER HILL GALLERY

I move to Carver Hill Gallery here, not merely because of photography, although the gallery indeed represents some challenging and accomplished photographers, but because of the freshness of its artists and their new work and, more importantly, its move to new digs in Camden.

Art-motivated Mainers should rejoice. Carver Hill is one of Maine's better and smarter galleries. The gallery represents artists from around the nation and around the world. Carver Hill certainly shows photography (Nick Gervin and John Kolkin, among others), but it specializes in strong (and sometimes quirky) painting, such as by America Martin or Jennifer Knaus.

Martin is a young Californian painter whose works look to Picasso and Leger, but her hand can handle it. "Woman, Eel & Fish," for example, might seem simple things, in the echoes of Picasso, but there is nothing simple about the power of Picasso, Matisse, Leger, Marin, Utrillo or the other artists who worked so hard to make the seemingly simple seem simple.

To set it in motion, Martin uses excellent drawing, scintillatingly clear, and planar colors. But to make it work, Martin has to find her own design, her own balance, her own picture. And she does.

Carver Hill Gallery's new space is a healthy step forward from its Rockland space. Its strong new space can now better feature more artists from its notable roster, such as Ron Rovner, Ingrid Ellison, Lesia Sochor and Rose Umerlik.

We've seen some major galleries close recently because of age and time. But Coastal Maine is a place of lively dynamism. Not all of the newness relates to the hitherto unknown; sometimes it rehashes aspects of what has always been. And sometimes, the "new" is a fresh space for an already-known gallery. Sometimes it's an addition. Sometimes it's new artists. And, sometimes, it's us – hitting our own reset buttons and looking with ever-fresh eyes.

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