

Art review: Maine's natural beauty masterfully portrayed in 2 engaging Portland shows

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By Jorge S. Arango

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Philip Frey, "Lyrical Liquid," 2023 *Courtesy of the artist*

After a winter that felt unrelentingly gray and erratic (one day 53 degrees, another 7), some of us could use a reminder of why we live in the great state of Maine. Enter the biennial landscape show "Maine: The Painted State" at Greenhut Galleries (through May 27) and "Tree Speech" at Cove Street Arts (through May 13).

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Maine: The Painted State"

WHERE: Greenhut Galleries, 146 Middle St., Portland

WHEN: Through May 27

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-772-2693, greenhutgalleries.com

WHAT: “Tree Speech”

WHERE: Cove Street Arts, 71 Cove St., Portland

WHEN: Through May 13

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-808-8911, covestreetarts.com

“Painted State” features work by a nearly complete roster of Greenhut’s artists, who have been adept at depicting the infinitely variable topographies, moods and seasons of Maine. I know that for me, several of the wintry scenes here would have been helpful to have on my wall in the depths of February’s chill. Chief among these is Tim Wilson’s “Whitefield,” which lyrically conveys the unique golden light of sunset over a snowy field through the layered stacking of expressionistic brushstrokes.

This painting conveys so much without resorting to meticulous detail: the filtering light of clouds, the brilliance of the receding sun, the blue-gray woods at the horizon line and the white field stretching out toward all of it. It reminds us of the very special quality of light that has drawn artists here for centuries.



Alec Richardson, “Shoreline Rough,” Isle au Haut *Courtesy of the artist*

In March’s seesawing temperatures, Alec Richardson’s “Shoreline Rough” would have reminded me that even in a frigid coastal mist, the groundcover is alive with the colors of lichen, moss, brilliant red and orange leaves or mushrooms, and blue-gray bayberry. Like

Wilson, Richardson's style is also expressionistic, so we cannot discern specific flora except for the ever-present firs. But the quickly sketched quality of this painting adds to the sense of dynamism in the cycles of nature.

One of the chief pleasures of the show is the variety of stylistic approaches artists have taken to capture something essential about the abundant natural magnificence of our state.



David Estey, "Harbor," 2005 *Courtesy of the artist*

There are plenty of summer pleasures. Colin Page captures the spread of warm glistening light across a lake in "First Swim of Summer." David Estey's "Harbor" inventively breaks up a familiar Maine scene into blocky planes of color that appear, as they often do, vividly saturated in the blazing summer sunlight. Philip Frey's "Lyrical Liquid" also applies this sort of planar compositional approach to his representation of clouds, surf, rocks and trees, achieving a jewel-like, many-faceted view of a seascape. And William Irvine's signature style of highly textured surfaces (achieved, it seems, using sponges, stippling and/or rollers) break his "Out of the Clouds" – an image of a sailboat on the water – into a handful of minimalist geometric shapes.



William Irvine, "Out of the Clouds" *Courtesy of the artist*

Conversely, there are more traditional approaches. Alison Rector's "Beach Rose" concentrates her composition on this familiar coastal flora, which dominates the center of the painting against a seascape rendered in a slightly hazy summer heat that is palpable. Joel Babb surveys mountains, valleys, woods and farmlands from above in considerable, yet not exact detail, in "Androscoggin Aerial Serpentine, Dark Hills." And Sarah Knock's "Receding Tide Over Ledges" evocatively telegraphs the transparent fluidity of water that reveals the rocky forms underneath.



Liz Awalt, "Island Woods," 2022 *Courtesy of the artist*

Other artists take to Maine's woods with expressionistic flair. Both of Liz Awalt's "Island Woods" offerings feel dense and alive with bold color and thick, energetically applied brushstrokes. Jeff Bye adds a veil of mystery to his "Hike (Southern Maine)" by applying barely visible striations of oil paint over a scene of fallen trees across a creek. We feel like we have to part this diaphanous scrim to enter the world of the painting.



John Whalley, "House in the Mills," graphite on paper *Courtesy of the artist*

Two artists beautifully take on manmade structures in the landscape. The juxtaposition of Tina Ingraham's Bath bridge images, which share an almost identical perspective, give us two equally wonderful ways of looking at this architecture – one more loosely awash in pinks at what looks like dawn or dusk; the other in sky blues. And John Whalley's graphite on paper "House in the Mills" is, quite simply, a marvel of obsessive detail. It's practically photorealist, but achieved with such an intense observation that you'll want to look at it for hours.

There's much more to take in, so allow yourself plenty of time.



Sarah Knock, "Receding Tide Over Ledges" *Courtesy of the artist*

IF THE WOODS COULD SPEAK

“Tree Speech” takes similarly diverse orientations to the more focused subject of trees. But while “The Painted State” concentrates on painting, this show luxuriates in an abundance of media that includes, among others, acid-cut vintage copper, tree bark, oil and acrylic paints, colored pencils, fabric, ink on mylar, watercolor, gouache, handmade papers and natural fibers. Like the Greenhut show, there is more here than I can cover, so I merely offer some highlights.



David Wilson, “Spell,” acrylic on Monk’s cloth *Courtesy of William Trevaskis*

The works that immediately drew me to the rear of the galleries are by David Wilson. He uses acrylic in black and various grisaille shades applied to Monk’s cloth, a loosely woven cotton fabric normally utilized for punch needle embroidery. Despite the monochromatic palette, in paintings like “Spell” and “Far Cove,” Wilson imagines stands of trees with the enchanted wonderment of a fairy tale. They teem with insects and what might be tree spirits. We can practically hear the buzzing, fluttering, cawing and rustling. They are spellbinding.

Speaking of tree spirits, Lesia Socher’s “Birch Mother” utilizes birch bark, fabric, wire and roots to form a sculpture that commands a powerful presence nearby. Around the gallery, various birch bark bowls and deft, delicate watercolors of birch bark by the same artist further emphasize the sense of “Birch Mother” as some formidable source that begets other forms of itself in different manifestations. Victoria Elbroch’s ink on paper, “Metamorphosis,” also conveys an inner life force, even if we are looking at what is basically a dead trunk that is overtaken with ferns, mosses and other plant life that feed on its carcass.

Judith Allen-Efstathiou's acid-cut images of trees on copper sheeting salvaged from the Maine State House dome effectively convey the lacy, filigreed patterning of bare branches between the fuller canopies overhead and denser underbrush below. Maret Hensick's extraordinary pencil drawing "In the Deep Woods" does this too, while also achieving the slightly blurred, wispy effect of a breeze moving through the forest. Her partner, Thomas Paiement, uses colored pencils to draw a stately evergreen in "Backyard Pine." What Paiement's palette of sage, lichen, moss and chartreuse greens does, however, is to cast it in the bright light of spring or summer, which is interesting because there is no visible sun here and the image is silhouetted against plain white paper. The colors themselves are what infuse the drawing with light.

I love Alan Fishman's "Autumn Gesture" and "Metamorphosis" for the way he renders the red leaves of the former and the orange leaves of the latter as simple washes of color (though "Metamorphosis" does have some actually discernible leaf forms). It makes these trees look like they are on fire, which is, of course, a metaphor for fall color, but also suggests the burning bush from the Book of Exodus. Knowing of Fishman's interest in themes drawn from classical myth and the Bible, these paintings suggest something beyond the merely natural.



Lesia Sochor, "Birch Mother," birch bark, roots, wire, fabric, glue, barrel hassock, branches
Courtesy of the artist



Maret Hensick, "In the Deep Woods," pencil, turpentine
Courtesy of the artist



Chris Beneman, "Forest Dream 2," monoprint *Courtesy of the artist*

Chris Beneman's monoprints were a revelation to me. I have seen a lot (perhaps too many) of her urban abstractions. Though I appreciate the complex layering and shadowing of these, which require an equally complex process, the works on view here indicate that something deeply heartfelt happens to Beneman in nature. Both monoprints are lovely, but "Forest Dream 2" feels as verdant and vibrant as her urban scenes feel analytical and emotionally distant. I look forward to more of her walks in the woods.

Joanna Logue's acrylics on birch panel, particularly "Wooded Pool," are animated and seem to pulse with energy. We can see the texture of the panel underneath, which may account for some of that. But the thickness and verticality of her brushstrokes in this painting transmit the reflective surface of the water in a manner that feels surprising because both the undiluted pigments and panel are opaque mediums that don't seem particularly suited to such a sense of liquid, mirror-like affect and depth.

Again, there is much more work, a lot of it very innovative (Jeff Woodbury's ink on mylar works and Karen Olson's delicate painted paper vessels are two of these). That sense of experimentation made this show the more interesting of the two for me, but both are superb, together comprising evocative reminders of the wealth of natural beauty we are lucky to live surrounded by in Maine.

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