

Art review: Regrets, he has a few, but it was a very good year for Maine art

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Looking back, 2018 was a robust year for art in Maine. It's not surprising that artists are energized during a time of caustic political division. But the shape of the public view of political art in a place like Maine is not obvious, particularly since venues can't respond in real time.

There were far too many excellent shows I didn't review. Considering the size of the state and the growing number of quality venues, this is a vast list. In fact, it's too long even for a simple list of worthy shows I missed.

I begin with Garry Mitchell, a Colby professor and an excellent painter. I have long admired his tensely intense abstractions. His elegant and poignant show at Speedwell Projects in Portland was a lesson in how to begin to take on political subjects. It was impressive on many levels.

Corey Daniels in Wells is almost peerless at the top of my list of Maine's best galleries. The gallery looked better than ever this year with an incredible lineup. But somehow I didn't manage to fit in a review. I regret that.





Garry Mitchell's show at Speedwell Projects in Portland was elegant and poignant.

Similarly, Dowling Walsh is the juggernaut gallery in Rockland: It's huge, gorgeous and features a startling broad array of Maine's most notable painters and photographers. What with so much going on in Rockland (more than 20 galleries, the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, the Farnsworth, etc.), it's going to get tougher for galleries to bubble to the top. So, while Dowling Walsh and the Farnsworth lead the list of my inkless regrets of the year, they are far from alone on that list.

One excellent exodus from Rockland was Carver Hill Gallery's move to Camden. It's a great gallery, and it's now in a better space in a town whose once-strong gallery roster had shriveled.

Courthouse Gallery in Ellsworth has quietly become one of Maine's most important and most successful galleries. The gallery has grown in scale as well as roster and audience. It's also large enough that you can always see works by your favorite gallery artists, particularly the new crop of Maine painters like Colin Page and Philip Frey. I saw many shows there this year that should have gotten ink.

Gleason Fine Art in Boothbay also mounted many excellent shows in 2018. The gallery's roster is loaded with contemporary Maine modernists, and proprietor Dennis Gleason has a great eye for Maine masters such as Fairfield Porter.

Thos. Moser in Freeport is not simply a furniture store. It's always filled with excellent painting – dozens of pieces at any given moment. Its namesake is one of Maine's best craftsmen, as well as one of its most fecund creative minds. The most recent exhibition featured an array of landscape artists divided into rooms by season. It was a beautiful and subtle show.

Waterfall Arts in Belfast is an extraordinary organization in a deeply artsy town. Waterfall mounted several excellent exhibitions in 2018, but I have kicked myself repeatedly for not getting to "Memories, Dreams & Reflections, Joe, Max & Tony Ascrizzi" in time for a review.

Of course, Maine galleries, museums and kunsthalls are not limited to reviewable shows. Some are too short. But there are other elements as well, such as artist talks or musical performances. Way overdue on my list is gWatson Gallery in Stonington: It's an elegant space, and I particularly lament missing the jazz performance – four hands on the gallery's fine piano – by Bruce Barth and Eri Yamamoto.



Greenhut Galleries in Portland had a terrific year of shows by its enormous stable of artists, including Matt Blackwell.

This was a year of art news as well, leading the way was the passing of Robert Indiana and the uncomfortable aftermath of his estate. There was also the unilateral decision of University of Southern Maine President Glenn Cummings to cancel three paintings from

“Industrial Maine – Our Other Landscape” at USM’s Lewiston-Auburn Atrium Gallery without consulting curator Janice Moore. The shuttering of Portland’s PhoPa Gallery is also a jagged pill.

Most importantly, the positives are far beyond what we have here for space.

To begin, this was the year of Daniel Minter. Building on his 2017 [Abyssinian Meeting House project](#), Minter has bubbled up to the top of most visible Maine artists with his incredible installation at the [Portland Museum of Art’s 2018 Biennial](#). It will be interesting to watch what happens with Minter now that he has the spotlight: His [Malaga Island show](#) at USM had nothing like the angry edge of his previous takes on the subject.

The CMCA is for real, and I wish I could have reviewed every one of its 2018 shows. However, finding their way in their new space is probably not as easy as it might have seemed. I am a huge Toshiko Mori fan and I think the new building, overall, is extraordinary. But the main gallery is tough. (Sorry, Ms. Mori, but those porthole thingys are awful.) That said, director Suzette McAvoy and her curatorial staff have done a bangup job of bringing excellent shows and making them look great.

Deb Whitney is back. The two drawing shows she curated at Engine in Biddeford this year were outstanding. More please.

Judy Glickman Lauder is not only a leading art philanthropist in Maine, but a fantastic photographer. Her new book is handsome, deep and impressive.

Greenhut Galleries has handled the mantle of Maine’s oldest and most established gallery with grace and impressive energy – despite the new ownership. Its slate of 2018 shows was incredible: I particularly regret not writing about the shows of John Whalley and David Driskell – who, though still active, will long be remembered as two of Maine’s greats.

In general, Portland’s art scene is thriving: While it doesn’t look like it used to, Speedwell Projects, Able Baker Contemporary, the Maine Jewish Museum, the Maine Museum of Photographic Arts (at USM), and the PMA (which got more of my 2018 ink than any other venue) all had excellent exhibition seasons. The Union of Maine Visual Artists Gallery is still growing, but it glowed as a particularly energetic outpost.



Daniel Minter's installation dominated the Portland Museum of Art's Biennial.

I was concerned that Maine College of Art's Institute of Contemporary Art would lose curatorial direction with the show-by-show approach, but it proved itself to be on solid ground in 2018 with a slate of sophisticated exhibitions. The exhibitions might have often missed the local audience, but by maintaining a predictable level, the matching audience is starting to find them.

The Ogunquit Museum of American Art also had particularly successful 2018; new-ish director Michael Mansfield clearly seems to be finding his way. (Now, if only they would put up a new building – it's possibly the best museum site in America, but that facility is hopelessly outdated.)

Finally, I have to once again toast Maine's leading college museums. George Kinghorn's University of Maine Museum of Art, USM (well, except for the censorship thing – that's a bit of a blight on the entire university) and University of Maine at Augusta all deserve a tip of the hat, but the real kudos go to Colby, Bowdoin and Bates. The Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville is objectively the largest college art museum in America, but its collection is the real gem, and it only grew bigger and better in 2018 (there are so many folks to thank, but the Lunders deserve special note – along with Judy Glickman Lauder – as Maine's most consequential art philanthropists). The Bates Museum of Art in Lewiston, under director

Dan Mills, presented an incredible slate of cutting-edge exhibitions while making particular strides with its print and drawings collections. The Bowdoin College Museum of Art presented several of Maine's best shows of the year, including its seminal consideration of Winslow Homer as related to photography.

Oh, we certainly had our share of bombs and blights, but 2018 was a banner year for Maine art. It's not the worst thing when my list of biggest regrets is shaped by so much excellence that I didn't have the space in 52 columns to cover it all.

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