

Art review: From seascapes to surreal photography, seeing Maine through 3 artists' eyes

Distinctly different perspectives emerge in paintings at Moss Galleries in Falmouth and two photo exhibits at Dowling Walsh in Rockland.

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Maine, as we know, is a dramatically diverse state – topographically, politically, economically, etc. Artists who paint, photograph, video and otherwise depict Maine are just as variegated, which makes it endlessly interesting to see how widely varied their views are and what subject matter calls their attention.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Robert Wieferich: Deep in the Woods”

WHERE: Moss Galleries, 251 Route 1, Falmouth

WHEN: Through Mar. 16

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

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-781-2620,
elizabethmoss galleries.com

WHAT: “S.B. Walker: Winter Apples” and “Dylan Hausthor: Foxgloves Down the Road from the Pickup That Has a Dead Battery”

WHERE: Dowling Walsh Gallery, 365 Main St., Rockland

WHEN: Through Mar. 30

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

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207.596.0034,
dowlingwalsh.com

Three current shows display distinctly different takes on life in the state. They range from classic Maine sea- and landscapes at Moss Galleries in Falmouth (“Robert Wieferich: Deep in the Woods,” through March 16) to decidedly odd and slightly surreal photography at Dowling Walsh in Rockland (the work of two young artists, “S.B. Walker: Winter Apples” and “Dylan Hausthor: Foxgloves Down the Road from the Pickup That Has a Dead Battery,” both through March 30).

Freeport painter Wieferich mines a longstanding artistic vein in this state. That is, painting seascapes and landscapes that capture Maine’s unique coastal light. This venerable tradition extends at least to the 19th century and is, arguably, what most people identify (rightly or wrongly) as its claim to fame on the national art scene. Which is why I have always had reservations about reviewing shows of this genre. Frankly, to paraphrase a bizarre 19th-century idiom, you can’t swing a dead cat in the Pine Tree State without hitting a Maine landscape/seascape painter.

But there is something almost thrilling about Wieferich's take on these themes. To my surprise, I felt my heart quicken as I viewed a dozen of his scenes of rocky coasts, rivers and forests, my mood becoming suddenly buoyant. It had everything to do with Maine's signature light (which was especially welcome on a drizzly cold February evening) and the way it interacts with rocks, water, trees and shadow.

Wieferich's works are unabashedly beautiful in their familiarity, and their apricity is more palpable here than in any similar scenes I've seen in recent memory. The title painting focuses in on a lichen-flecked boulder in the woods. The way light filters through the tree canopy and falls upon the boulder and the roots of an adjacent tree is, quite simply, masterful. It is perhaps the best painting in which to observe the tremendous nuance required to depict light and shadow in a way that one can actually feel throughout all five senses.

The sunlit sections of rock contain a mass of white color values, as well as golds, grays and rosy pinks. Areas in shadow contain many hues of blue, lavender, peach, pink and gray. From a distance, this subtlety is imperceptible. Yet what it conveys is so effective that we not only visually perceive the play of light and shadow, but also smell the moist loam of the forest, reflexively squint from the intermittent stabs of light hitting our retina as it penetrates the leaves, hear the breeze and the birds, and taste the fresh astringency of pine and mustiness of leaves decaying on the forest floor.

Robert Wieferich, "Trout Water" *Photo courtesy of Moss Galleries*

Paintings such as "Trout Water" and "Early Morning, Fall Day" excel at the way light reflects off river water, the mirror effects obscuring everything beneath the surface, while areas left in shadow reveal the muddy floor under the ripples. "Trout Water," is particularly skillful in the way Wieferich achieves this fluid oscillation between reflection and transparency. Again, viewing these is a multi-sensual experience. We can hear the river currents trickle and rush, feel and taste the water's icy freshness, and touch the scratchy rust of the iron bridge spanning the stream.

Wieferich also does something I've rarely seen. Many artists have painted white caps and the foam of waves crashing on rocks. But Wieferich prefers to depict the aftermath of these phenomena, when the wave has rushed back out to sea, leaving little bubbles of foam in its wake that sparkle on transparent water, as in "Washed Out Bridge."

Robert Wieferich, "Washed Out Bridge" *Photo courtesy of Moss Galleries*

What I found most intriguing is the understanding this painter has that to achieve this degree of multisensory perception – in texture, light, shadow, sound, taste – what is needed is not, counterintuitively, photorealism. While these are instantly recognizable depictions of locations,

they're clearly not realistic enough to trick the eye into thinking of them photographically. This is something the Impressionists intimately understood. But it's not Impressionism, either. These paintings hover somewhere in the middle. In so doing, they are evocative in ways that other artists would kill to emulate.

WALKER'S SENSE OF SNOW

I first became aware of S.B. Walker's work at a Center for Maine Contemporary Art exhibition in August 2021, a show called "Nor'East" that documented the social landscape of Maine, a state he'd crisscrossed over six years shooting in black and white. There are some images from that epic undertaking on view here. But the first thing I noticed is the expanded scale at which he's working – 24-by-36 inches and larger. This functions perfectly to up the eccentricity quotient of many of the images.

S.B. Walker, "Target, Ice Melt, Walden Pond," 2011, archival pigment print, 30" x 40" *Photo courtesy of the artist/Dowling Walsh Gallery*

Walker's eye is drawn to the odd and sometimes patently bizarre. Images are mostly taken in Maine, but not exclusively. For instance, there is "Target, Ice Melt, Walden Pond," a scene of the idyllic setting for Henry David Thoreau's famous literary work, in which he waxed reverential about the simple beauties of nature. Indeed, the pond is magnificent – surrounded by forest, a thick mist arising from the surface as floating ice sheets melt. Yet in the left foreground is a plastic Target bag floating on the water. I don't get the sense that Walker is sending us some message about man's destructive encroachment on nature. It's simply a peculiar apparition; the kind that he just can't resist.

Back in Maine, there is “Window, Rockland” which crops into a view of a home’s bay window in which sits an enormous stuffed-toy cheetah. What? It’s funny while also being unsettlingly incomprehensible.

S.B. Walker, “Deering Oaks, Portland,” 2018, archival pigment print, 30” x 24” *Photo courtesy of the artist/Dowling Walsh Gallery*

Walker chronicles the eerie effects of nighttime artificial light on snow in “Johnson, Vermont” and “Deering Oaks, Portland,” conveying something serene and quiet, yet also spooky and maybe a little ominous. Or he revels in baffling phenomena, like “Ice Disk, Westbrook,” a slowly spinning plate of ice that appears periodically on the town’s stretch of the Presumpscot River.

S.B. Walker, "Near the Frost's, Lincoln," 2011, archival pigment print, 40" x 50" *Photo courtesy of the artist/Dowling Walsh Gallery*

Even what might seem innocuous, such as "Near the Frost's, Lincoln" – an image that gallery owner Jake Walsh, manager Virginia Walck and I all immediately associated with the Jimmy Stewart Christmas classic "It's a Wonderful Life" – feels weirdly out of whack somehow, as if the snowy sidewalk will lead us somewhere we might not want to go.

It is a perfect winter show, and not just because Walker is, in the end, trying to capture the many qualities of snow – its play of light and shadow, its capacity for reflection and absorption, its graininess and mistiness, etc. It encourages us to see how this precipitation affects buildings and

landscapes and, by the way it obliterates surrounding detail, focuses our gaze on quirky moments we might normally miss.

MOTHS TO A FLAME

Hausthor's photography is at once fascinating, inscrutable and subversive. Moths and spider webs are a major presence in many of the images. But unless you know some backstory, you won't understand how unconventionally this artist's mind works. The first thing you should do is to stop looking for links between image and title. There is usually no real correlation, which of course intentionally sends us off the trail of logical comprehension.

Dylan Hausthor, "glock tucked, big t shirt, billie eilish," 2024, archival pigment print, 20" x 16" *Photo courtesy of the artist/Dowling Walsh Gallery*

The title "glock tucked, big t shirt, billie eilish" is a lyric from a song by rapper Armani White. Yet the image is of a moth being ensnared by a spider in its web. What you won't know coming in cold to this work is that Hausthor has pulled mascara across a filter that he fits over their lens, which makes the spider and web sparkle, and that this is an homage to a porn star whose films often employed this technique. (This may also refer to the phrase "use mascara," which is code for "wear a mask"). If there is a connection between image and title, it is that the spider, thanks to this technique, appears white, a color that matches the last name of the rapper. But this link is tenuous at best.

The most breathtaking works are a suite of seven photos – one for each night of the week that a particular moth visited Hausthor’s window on Peaks Island. They are matted and rimmed in a band of orange and, on the inside of the glass, they have adhered a real spider’s web. These webs, of course, can never catch the moth, but the potential danger they pose for the moth is implicit.

Dylan Hausthor, “my friend is reading virginia woolf and i’m embarrassed because i never have,” FP-100C, 24” x 20” *Photo courtesy of the artist/Dowling Walsh Gallery*

Another suite of photos are Polaroids that have been framed in pairs or trios of shots that are randomly placed within the matting. One, “my friend is reading virginia woolf and I’m embarrassed because I never have,” reveals two photos of spider webs in the upper left corner of the image field and an image of an owl in the lower right. Again, there’s no correlation between image and title; it’s just a personal statement. Hausthor has said the odd positioning within the frame is a response to “the real boredom with the bathtub ring of gallery walls,” meaning the images ringing a gallery room, all at the same level. By placing his Polaroids randomly within the matting, the viewer’s eye travels up, down and all around rather than in just one linear direction.

But here Hausthor is doing something else too. The images relate to the way a narrative unfolds through the pages of a book. The way disparate images are forced together reflects the twists and turns of a storyline, and they think of the titles as “footnotes” at the bottom of each page. They are

also working with makeup in the production of these, in this case drawn across vellum and stuffed into the camera.

The use of Polaroid film is also no coincidence. This company's early success is indebted to gay men who photographed themselves having sex, since the image did not require a third party to develop (which would risk arrest and public disgrace). *Hausthor* is thus excavating a bit of history and commenting on the irony of hipsters who have made Polaroids a generational trope used completely without awareness of that history. The joke, obviously, is on them.

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