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Art review: Old Masters, Maine landscapes among influences on display at Cove Street

By Jorge Arango



Elise Ansel, “Veronese’s Venus VI,” 2021, oil on linen, 20 x 16 *Photo by Luc Demers*

Can Elise Ansel get any better or take her ideas any further? It’s hard to believe she could, considering the breathtaking work on display in “Elective Affinities” at Cove Street Arts. Her economy of means in communicating so much makes this latest work stand out like visual haikus amid the other exhibits at Cove Street. These include her husband’s “Dirigo” (like Ansel’s, through Aug. 12); Phoebe Adams’s “A Thing in Time” and Kayla

Mohammadi's "Seeing Through" (both through Sept. 9); and Mohammadi's husband's "John Walker: Selected Prints" (through Jan. 31). There are also two monumental paintings by Tom Hall, who will have a larger solo show in August.

Ansel combines visual spareness with immense sensuality. She has an astonishing ability to distill the intensity of paintings by Old Masters – Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Titian, Veronese – and their chiaroscuro effects into a few boldly expressive and incredibly sensual gestures (by which I mean both materially sensual and sensual from a palpably feminine perspective). Thus, her paintings are easily grasped visually, while at the same time remaining utterly, beautifully mysterious.

If you didn't know her "Venus V" and "Venus VI" were based on Paolo Veronese's 1570 painting "Venus and Mars," you might wonder what these luxuriant, wide, taffy-like ribbons of pink might signify. They are actually the luminous, undulating essences of Veronese's fleshy goddess. A horse at right is reduced to a white volume in one painting and an even ghostlier white "shadow" in the other. Mars as the centrally dominant figure seems to have vanished all together.



Elise Ansel, "Emmaus II," 2023, oil on linen, 40 x 50 *Photo by Luc Demers*

Ansel's choice of source material in "Emmaus" and "Emmaus II" is interesting in that Caravaggio's "Supper at Emmaus" (1606) is the subtler of two paintings the Baroque master did depicting Christ appearing in a household after his resurrection. His first was all dramatic gesture and color, while this version is more powerfully understated in its stillness and near monochrome.

This reveals an artist already predisposed to distillation, to what is most important. In this case, that means Christ and light. Ansel's green stands in for the former's robe, while a slash of white above it is basically the light on his face. The latter strokes represent the area in the original work that Caravaggio chose to illuminate, leaving the rest in semi-darkness and, by so doing, intensifying the mystery. This is actually what Ansel's own fields of darkness – out of which emanations of color emerge – accomplish as well.

It's fascinating to dissect each painting, but I would rather leave that to viewers in order not to get too didactic and spoil their enigmatic atmospheres and the visceral responses they elicit. But I do want to say two more things. One is about Ansel's actual technique, which itself furtively avoids definitive logical or empirical explanation. There are moments in her paintings – the creamy gray-green at the lower left of "Judith and Her Maidservant II" (based on Artemisia Gentileschi), that fleshy pink of "Venus VI" or the pale green at upper right of "Venus VII" – that confound our understanding of how they came to be. Where did she start and where did she end those gestures? Clearly, she's using a squeegee, brushes and other materials to move her color around. But I defy anyone to nail down exactly how she accomplished those effects.

The other piece is the feminine sensibility. There's no question she admires the artistry of these Old Masters, but by downplaying the male presence, and by the soft fluidity of her gestures, Ansel is subtly asking us to reconsider the art canon that was developed by men and left out – until very recently – the story of women in the arts. She doesn't knock you over the head with it, but it doesn't mean we don't sense it at some very profound level of our response.

COMING TO EARTH

There is so much realistic landscape painting in Maine that whenever I see an artist working in this genre, I ask, "What does this person bring that is fresh and

interesting?” Jim Mullen’s majestic and highly skillful works bring a good deal. First and foremost is his sense of the land’s momentousness. His most impactful works are impressively large, enveloping us in the rocks, forests and coasts of the state.



James Mullen, “Pandemic CFP,” Oil on linen, 40 x 120 (diptych) *Photo by Luc Demers*

Second is the way he depicts expansiveness. This has to do with the horizontality of many canvases, the largest of which, “Pandemic (CFP),” is 40 by 120 inches. We see a forest where trees are being cut and lumbered. By expanding the scene out in this way, we get the message of the destruction in an impactful, almost 180 degrees. Conversely, at the 10 by 74 inches of “Maine #23 (Nonesuch River, Scarborough),” the horizontality enhances our appreciation of how lucky we are to live in a place where there is so much lushness spread out all around us.

Mullen’s works begin as photographs, likely taking advantage of his camera’s “pano” function. But like many painters before him, he also has an evanescent sense of Maine’s light, the very reason so many artists come here to paint. Ironically, it’s most gorgeously rendered in “Pandemic (CFP).” But this could also be intentional, a way we might more palpably value the disappearance of natural beauty and resources everywhere.



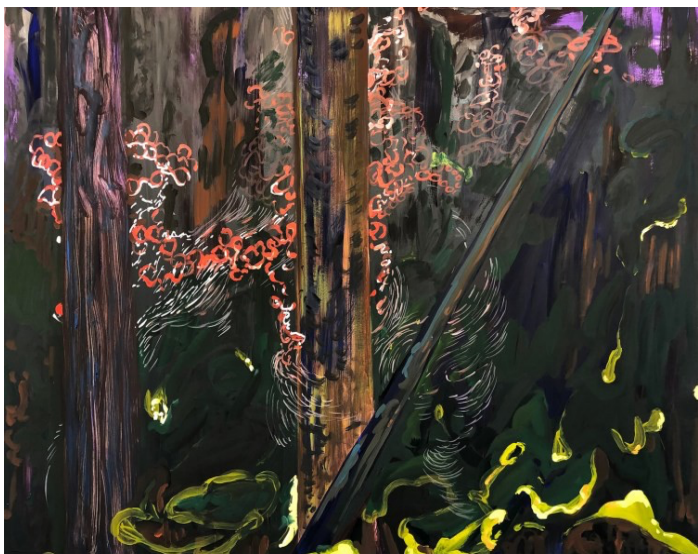
James Mullen, “Maine #23 (Nonesuch River, Scarborough),” oil on linen, 10 x 74 *Photo by Luc Demers*

Lastly, Mullen's at times vertiginous perspectives – “Raven's Nest (Schoodic Point)” or “Schoodic from Great Head Beach)” – can make us dizzy, all the more effectively conveying the awesome nature of what surrounds us. In these ways, this artist's work feels both quietly reverential and a call to action.

JUST BENEATH THE SURFACE

Jackson Pollock used to say that in his drip paintings, he was trying to depict the underlying rhythms of nature. In a way, that is Phoebe Adams's intention as well. But her means are not just different; they are exciting in the way they expand the breadth of what that can mean.

Known mainly as a sculptor, Adams splits her time between Phippsburg and the West, and her work at Cove Street is inextricably tied to those landscapes. These paintings, however, are as unliteral as Mullen's are meticulously realistic. That's because Adams is after a much more expansive perception of multiple layers of consciousness in her experience of the land.



Phoebe Adams, “Whispering of Trees,” 2021, acrylic gouache on panel, 30 x 40 *Photo courtesy of the artist*

Though we see actual tree trunks in “Whispering of Trees” and white lines and red circular ones indicate the movement and susurrations of the wind rustling through them, it's clear she's painting much more. She shows us her own very personal response to the woods, which includes the awareness of their deep, dark mystery, a mystery that can feel slightly eerie. She is also conscious of the

forest's perpetual state of peril, the sense of how its ecosystem is being affected by loss of habitat, toxic chemicals (the acid yellows at the bottom of the painting look emphatically not like dappled sunlight). And so on.

In almost all the works, the importance of gesture displays a tangible feeling of motion, which, by extension, telegraphs a sensation of time moving relentlessly on. "What Change Brings" has so much going on that we might be flooded by emotion at the rushing of forms across the canvas at many perceptual levels between surface and depth. Her mark making can evoke sponges and coral, mushrooms and beehives, clouds and corpuscles, ledge rocks and pebbles, plant life and veins and arteries.



Phoebe Adams, "What Change Brings," 2021, acrylic gouache on panel, 30 x 40 *Photo courtesy of the artist*

In this way, many paintings also simultaneously juxtapose microcosms and macrocosms, creating a tension in the back-and-forth, but also effectively illustrating the interrelation and symbiosis of all things. We could be looking at organisms under a microscope or gazing through a telescope at the explosion of a star. It's worth just surrendering to the interconnected wonder of it all.

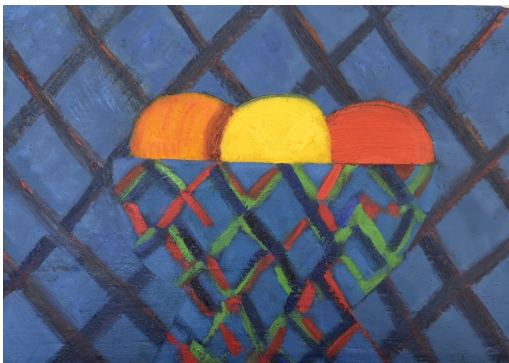
COLOR, THE SEDUCER

Kayla Mohammadi's paintings are like mirages. The forthrightness of her bright colors can feel irresistible. Yet when you get into them, you don't necessarily find what you were expecting. Mohammadi often positions the viewer behind a window or some other imposed grid, or behind fields of

patterns that partially obscure or veil a subject. That means we're often not looking directly at a subject, but through something else at it (hence the title, "Seeing Through"). But what pulls us in initially is the lusciousness of foreground color.

There's a painterly, gestural quality to these foregrounds that belie her abiding interest in abstraction, the expression of pure pigment without concrete form. This is what dissolves as we come closer in and focus on what is beyond – a dock, or a setting sun. Or we glimpse moonlight on the water through an iron railing, a dock through waves that partially submerge it.

However, what is most interesting about the paintings on display at Cove Street is that the distance between foreground and beyond has been collapsed in several cases, and in the best of them they meet and meld to tweak our perception. The "Bird Bath" paintings, for example, are almost completely abstract. Though we can barely make out the form of this object, we mainly know it is there because the surface patterning and the form come together on one plane in the form of a density of "X" strokes in bright color.



Kayla Mohammadi, "Fruit Bowl with Lattice," oil on panel, 12 x 16 *Photo courtesy of the artist*

"Fruit Bowl with Lattice" has it both ways. The bowl itself is, like the "Bird Bath" paintings, melded with the surface pattern, differentiated mainly by its colors. But the fruit in the bowl lives closer to the surface and the viewer, so that we are tricked into a perceptual conundrum.

Perhaps because of the bright color, they feel light-hearted and a dizzying in the way of some Op Art. Because they blur the mirage effect – keeping the illusion (in this case of space) both explicit and not – these feel more intriguing than works that clearly define surface, such as "Woman in Yellow II."

PRINCE OF TIDES

John Walker has been painting abstracting the mudflats beyond his windows for years. We see what the landscapes looks like after tides recede – the meandering rivulets of water as they journey to the sea, globular and finger-shaped tidal pools, sands ridged by the outgoing flow.

What is different about his prints is that, expressed in more monochrome, these regular characters become almost pure abstract patterns, losing more and more of their connection to anything representational (except, of course, for fish and rock shapes in many).

In a sense, Walker’s prints have affinities with the importance of pattern in Mohammadi’s paintings and the sort of distillation that occurs in Ansel’s.

Also worth a look is “Water,” the photo show curated by Bruce Brown. There are very beautiful images here, but also some that are more about the reflective potential of this element than its liquid quality (Katherine Ferrier’s images).

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Elective Affinities,” “Dirigo,” “A Thing in Time,” “Seeing Through” and “John Walker: Selected Prints”

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

WHEN: Through Aug. 12 and Sept. 9 (depending on show), 2023

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

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-808-8911, covestreetarts.com