

# A world of material takes over Center for Maine Contemporary Art

'Materiality' at the Rockland gallery shows how Maine art and Maine artists are expanding their vocabulary.

BY BOB KEYES STAFF WRITER



"Mutated Growth," by Jackie Brown of Bath, is the centerpiece of "Materiality! The Matter of Matter," which features the work of 12 artists. Brown's mutated biological forms are made with clay, chipboard, concrete, epoxy, foam, paint, plaster, poly, metal, rubber and wood. *Staff photo by Shawn Patrick Ouellette*

ROCKLAND — Jackie Brown's art shifted when she learned about research by Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientist Angela Belcher, whose specialties include materials science and biological

engineering. She was particularly taken by Belcher's ability to alter viruses to grow batteries and found striking the scientist's language about manipulating the periodic table and combining elements in unnatural ways.

"The implications of this are pretty mind-blowing and full of exciting potential, but it's also disconcerting to think about what might happen as we meddle with nature," said Brown, a sculptor from Bath and assistant professor of art at Bowdoin College in Brunswick.

We get an idea of what that meddling might look like at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland, where Brown's "Mutated Growth" is the centerpiece of an expansive, evocative and curious exhibition, "Materiality! The Matter of Matter."

"Mutated Growth" looks like a biology experiment gone awry, with mutant organs and imagined biological systems in yellow, green, red and other vibrant colors. It's part of a large-scale group show with 12 Maine artists, organized around the idea of material – how artists use new and unexpected materials in their work and expand the dimensions and potential of traditional materials. All the work is new, and much of it was created for this exhibition. Some of the artists are widely known, and others are making their debut in Maine.

Curated by CMCA's associate curator Bethany Engstrom, "Materiality!" fills all the public spaces at CMCA with work that takes advantage of the gallery's tall ceilings, large walls and open rooms. Art made with wood, metal, canvas, plastic, pollen, rubber, clay, silver and other components hangs from the walls, suspends from the ceilings and sits on the floor. "It's amazing to see what people are doing with material here in Maine," Engstrom said. "They are really pushing the materials they are using and

what can be done with them. There's a fun factor associated with a lot of this work."



"Rock," "Paper" and "Scissors," by Emilie Stark-Menneg, form an homage to her 94-year-old grandmother, Lucille Stark, "a powerhouse, giving intelligent and compassionate wisdom to her family and friends," Stark-Menneg said. *Staff photo by Shawn Patrick Ouellette*

That fun factor may explain why this show is popular with school groups. It's colorful and playful, CMCA Executive Director Suzette McAvoy said, and kids respond to its energy and vibrancy. "Materiality!" opened in mid-November and is on view through Feb. 11.

Brown's mutant biological forms, which she makes with clay, chipboard, concrete, epoxy, foam, paint, plaster, poly, metal, rubber and wood, ooze through the space, suggesting growth, movement and transformation. Her pieces feel alive, active and organic.

Brown, who began teaching sculpture at Bowdoin in 2014, started her art practice sculpting the human figure. Over time, as she broke down the figure and deconstructed the body, she began thinking of the body as a series of interconnected systems. This revolutionized her work and altered

her approach to making things. “I started to engage abstraction, and it was through abstraction that a new world of forms and ideas opened up for me,” she wrote in an email. “I started relating the systems of the body to other systems of growth in the natural world, and I began to think more broadly about biological forms responding, relating and reacting to one another.”

The work on view at CMCA is a result of that process and involves splicing together previous installations to create something new “so the work is always malleable, always morphing and expanding, always in a state of becoming something new,” Brown wrote. This is the first time she has shown her sculptures in Maine.

At the heart of the work is a love of material and an ongoing curiosity about what it means to be alive, Brown said. “I hope the installation invites people to look closely and to have a visceral experience as they move through the space and encounter the myriad of forms, colors and surfaces.”

Engstrom got the idea for this show during CMCA’s biennial cycle a year ago. While managing submissions for the biennial jury, she saw a theme emerging in the work. “So many artists were speaking through the material itself,” she said. “I knew some of these artists and started speaking with them and doing studio visits. It evolved from that. I didn’t have a particular vision at the beginning. I let it evolve as I began seeing the work.”



Emilie Stark-Menneg, who keeps a studio in Brunswick, is showing four large-scale paintings, including “Big Kitty Picture Show.” *Staff photo by Shawn Patrick Ouellette*

## PLAYING WITH POLLEN

During that time, Benjamin Potter of Belfast was painting a mural on a building in Rockland as part of his residency with the Ellis-Beauregard Foundation. Engstrom took notice, and they began talking. That led to a studio visit, which led to Potter’s inclusion in “Materiality!”

His piece, “Small Mountains,” consists of ceramic block forms painted with silver and pollen. His block forms look like a cityscape of low-rise buildings, except he hangs these vertically on the wall instead of placing them on a flat, horizontal surface. They’re textured to look like topographical maps, but the most compelling element of this work is Potter’s use of pollen to add color. He collects pollen from cattails that grow in a marsh in Belfast, wading into the marsh in the early summer, snapping the tops off the cattails and allowing them to dry before sifting out the pollen. He fills a large mason jar or two each season.



In his own way, he is using the Maine landscape in his art. Potter, 47, has been using nontraditional materials – dirt, ash and soot, in addition to pollen – since high school because they are unpredictable. “They won’t do what you expect they will do or what you want them to do, and that chance is a nod to the much larger world that we live in,” said Potter, who teaches art at Unity College.

The material of Ian Trask consists of things he picks from his community’s waste stream. He is among a growing class of [artists who use their concerns about the environment](#) as fuel for their art practice. Trask, who lives in Brunswick and has a studio at Fort Andross, collects common materials that might otherwise end up in landfills or recycling centers and makes orbs of varying sizes. At CMCA, he is showing a piece called “Bound” that brings together more than 100 orbs, or spores, of pill bottles, plastic bags, wine corks, cardboard and other common household objects. They range from 2 inches to 3 feet in diameter. Trask transforms waste material into art through reinterpretation and reinvention.

“Bound” has been one of the most popular pieces in the show, McAvoy said, likely because people enjoy identifying the materials and understanding their roles in our lives. A common response to this body of work is that it’s fun, Trask said. The work addresses what he calls “a seriously depressing topic” in a playful manner.

“In my opinion, this makes it easier to approach and engage with. Once I can get people up close, the process of recognition and identification begins,” he said. “Presenting the sculptures at this quantity produces a visual effect that reminds me of some sort of kaleidoscopic treasure hunt.”

He hopes his art encourages people to think about the waste they produce and how they handle it. His work is timely and important. “We’re at a moment in time when it almost feels like our progress on tackling our

waste problem is stalling out,” he said. “It’s been long understood that dumping everything into landfills isn’t going to work. Collectively, we’ve all gotten better at picking recyclable items out of the waste stream, and our recycling options are even expanding and improving. And creative reuse is being incorporated into large-scale manufacturing and building projects. Yet it still seems like an impossibly hard, uphill battle.”

He collects his materials from his communities. In addition to pulling from the trash he generates, he accesses the waste streams that exist around him. When he is looking for a specific item, he reaches out to his network and asks for it, such as he did a few years ago when he built a [monumental installation](#) of blister pack material. At other times, the process is more passive and open. “I encourage my community to think of me before they throw something out,” he said. “Of course not everything offered to me is aesthetically interesting or useful in any obvious way. But it’s counter-productive to be too selective and turn things away, so I try to develop systems for utilizing and consuming it all.”

“Bound” at the CMCA is an example of what happens when he openly accepts and incorporates whatever waste materials are donated. He makes spores with ropes, electrical cords, plastic rings. The donation-based relationship with his community is among the most interesting parts of his practice, he said. “It becomes more than a donation. It’s a collaboration with those around me – they shape my art, and I shape their thoughts.”



Ian Trask's materials consist of things he picks from his community's waste stream. For "Bound," the Brunswick artist created orbs made of pill bottles, plastic bags, wine corks, cardboard and other discarded household objects. *Staff photo by Shawn Patrick Ouellette*

## HOMAGE TO A GREAT GRANDMOTHER

Painter Emilie Stark-Menneg, who also has a studio at Fort Andross in Brunswick, is showing four large-scale paintings in "Materiality!" Three form a series of tributes to her grandmother, Lucile Stark, who, at 94, "is a powerhouse, giving intelligent and compassionate wisdom to her family and friends," the artist said. She painted her grandmother large as a tribute to her energy and spirit. "She is grappling with the hardships of aging, the physical and mental toll of losing one's loved ones and one's ability to negotiate independently in the world. I am awed by her stoicism and her ability to move forward with dignity and resilience."

She made her paintings with many different kinds of paint and created a beaded-tapestry effect by pushing paint through a window screen. She discovered the process by accident. "I was trying to paint on top of the



screen; when I turned it over, the undulating, pixelated surface of the backside was surprising and way more interesting,” she said.

She pressed paint through a cake-frosting bag, creating little buttons that texture her paintings and look good enough to eat. She likes combining materials in new and unusual ways and loves showing her large, experimental canvases at CMCA. “I feel the space elevates the paintings (and) gives them room to breathe and expand into new imaginative realms,” she said. “The gallery feels spiritual and contemplative, which gives my riotous, saturated paintings room to be wild and dance.”

Stark-Menneg’s neon-bright paintings hang in the same gallery as Brown’s colorful, organic sculpture, and they share space with a wall-size canvas installation by Aaron Stephan of Portland. Collectively, those three artists present visitors with a wildly exuberant experience, centered on color, form, imagination and whimsy.

McAvoy said the timing is good for this exhibition, which anchors CMCA’s second winter season in Rockland. The gallery moved from its longtime home in Rockport in June 2016. CMCA projected first-year attendance at 35,000 and exceeded that number by more than 5,000 visitors, McAvoy said. More than 5,500 people visited CMCA during Rockland’s monthly art walks from May to November.

In a late-November story about Rockland’s arts revival, the Boston Globe described the midcoast city as [“an artsy enclave](#), with a swelling cluster of studios and galleries, and a vibrant, growing community of artists, chefs, boatbuilders, sculptors, architects, and more.”

McAvoy said CMCA is one reason for the city’s resurgence.

“It brings a sense of joy and satisfaction to see all of the plans, hard work and vision have come to fruition and are working the way we knew they could. We knew the audience and the support were here,” she said.

“The artists are responding to the space, and the public is responding to the art. We’re stretching the idea of what Maine art is and what Maine art can be, and this exhibition embodies that idea.”