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# Fitchburg Art Museum combines traditional landscapes with contemporary works



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By **Nancy Sheehan**  
Correspondent

Posted Oct. 2, 2015 at 6:00 AM

There's a new look to the landscape at Fitchburg Art Museum.

Curator Mary Tinti has enlivened the sometimes stodgy theme of landscape painting by adding a contemporary take on the topic in a new exhibition, called "Land Ho!." The show, which runs through Jan. 10, adroitly combines traditional landscape paintings from the museum's collection with fresh visions of the concept by contemporary artists from throughout New England.

It is a multi-generational approach the museum used successfully two years ago with a still life show and plans to use again in the future around the theme of portraiture. The juxtaposition of



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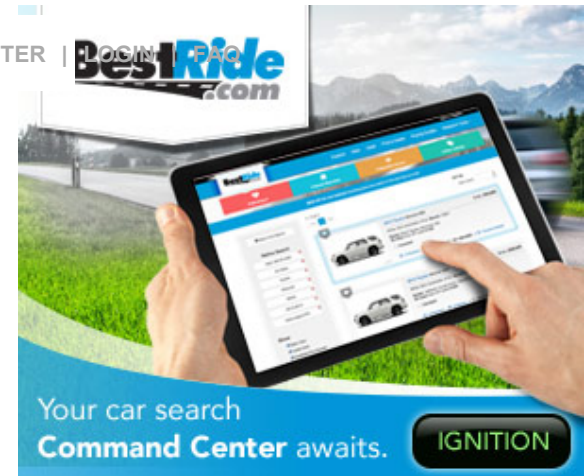
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Fitchburg Art Museum curator Mary Tinti, left, and curatorial fellow Emily Mazzola organized the museum's new "Land Ho!" group exhibit of landscapes. T&G Staff Photos/Paul Kapteyn



contemporary pieces is meant to show that landscape isn't just a historical genre. "It's alive and well today and there are an infinite number of ways that people are exploring it," Tinti said.

For "Land Ho!," she invited eight contemporary artists to be part of the exhibition. "I had sort of been keeping track of some New England artists who work in the landscape tradition, had a very contemporary eye, work with unique perspectives and bold colors and who really kind of shake up our notions of what landscape can be," she said.

Tinti tapped Carrie Crane, Sally Curcio, Leila Daw, Warner Friedman, Michele Lauriat, Sandy Litchfield, Shona Macdonald and Sue McNally to exhibit their work alongside 30 landscapes from the museum's permanent collection. But even the traditional aspect of the show has new twists, with landscapes by famous artists such as Edward Hopper, Rockwell Kent and Charles Burchfield hanging alongside work by artists who are largely unknown.

"It's kind of a mixed bag, actually," Nicholas Capasso, FAM's director, said. "We've got some

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landscapes by some very famous artists and we also have landscape paintings by artists that I, as an art historian, had never heard of. We're not sure they've ever been shown to the public before so it's exciting to bring these things out and show them in conversation with other work."

One such painting that languished in storage until this show is a rolling rural landscape by Yvonne Twining Humber (1907 to 2004) that hangs at the top of the stairs as you enter the galleries. "It's by an artist who was in the sort of Regionalist school in the 1930s and 1940s and it's this utterly charming painting that I had never seen," said Capasso, who was appointed museum director three years ago.

Tinti had found the painting in a closet at the museum, and FAM curatorial fellow Emily Mazzola did some historical research on it to suss out its significance. She learned that the artist had been a painter with the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project in Boston. "She painted for them the entire duration of the program and this is one piece she produced while she was under their stewardship," Mazzola said. "We happen to know that she was being supported by the program only enough to really support herself and her mother and couldn't afford a studio so she was painting in and around Boston and using the outdoors as her inspiration instead."

Discovering such hidden gems in the collection was one of the gratifying aspects of pulling the show together, according to Tinti, who has worked at the museum just over two years. Mazzola began her fellowship in July.

"We're new," Tinti said. "We're discovering these things for the first time but also part of the beauty of doing a show like this is that you get to dust these things off. You get to clean them up and make sure they're in good condition. You get to preserve them a little bit and put them on view."

No conservation work was done on the long-stored paintings but framing expert, Susan Jackson, a member of FAM's board of trustees and an associate of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, touched up a lot of the frames on the collection pieces to improve the presentation.

The museum could have simply culled the collection and placed selected older landscapes on view and that would have made a pleasing enough show but, by the inclusion of contemporary pieces, the exhibition is immeasurably invigorated. "We thought what better way to dust them off and put them on view than to put them in conversation with some of the New England artists who were doing awesome things in that genre," Tinti said.

A less appealing show also likely would have resulted had the contemporary paintings been placed

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in one gallery and the historical paintings in another, a linear categorization Tinti decidedly wanted to avoid. "We thought the real energy of the show, the dynamism and the interesting connections could be made if these things were interspersed, hung together, then all sorts of cross-generational dialogue could happen."

And it does quite nicely, although some of the interfaces are more direct than others. A painting of Mount Monadnock by noted artist Rockwell Kent hangs beside a more Modernist version of Monadnock by Sandy Litchfield of Amherst. Other groupings rely more on subtle connections of line, color or tone that skillfully manage to unite pieces as seemingly disparate as an atmospheric traditional country scene and Worcester area artist Carrie Crane's aerial abstractions on layers of Lexan.

An inviting painting by Henry Hammond Gallison (1850 to 1910) is of a grassy expanse, a beautiful but largely treeless panorama more typical of the cleared New England landscapes of his time. It hangs happily near a painting by Shona Macdonald that is bucolic in all its elements except for the several hooked pipeline vents that punctuate the scene. Other works by Macdonald in the show feature such atypical landscape subjects as orange safety cones and reflectors of the type often used to mark driveway entrances.

"She loves this idea of all of these modern-day interruptions in our landscape, that sort of breaking up the more pastoral vistas," Tinti said.

Taking up an entire gallery wall is Leila Daw's "Calling the Earth to Witness," a complex eight-panel statement expressing at once the beauty of the planet and its human-caused environmental degradation. The first four panels are based on the extensive river systems of Myanmar, with intricate beading and embroidery done onsite by Daw and some of the local artisans there. Over the second four panels, Myanmar morphs into a painting of the Mississippi Delta along with depictions of watercraft that ply the rivers in both locations.

"It has an environmental bent to it because our riverways and water systems are often the first to feel the stresses we put on our environment," Tinti said. "She very much wishes this to be an awakening, a call to action and sort of a recognition of all of that."

Another imposing piece is a 90-by-114 inch landscape by Sue McNally of Newport, Rhode Island, called "Maroon Bells, Colorado," a vivid mountain scene with heightened colors and sweeping strokes that give a strong sense of the natural vibrancy of the Rockies.

The painting is part of a series in which McNally plans to paint at least one grand canvas in each of the 50 states. But a grand canvas doesn't necessarily need a majestic mountain subject. Another of

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McNally's pieces included in the show is called "Cow Pond," a large canvas with a close-in view of a frog pond frequented by neighborhood children in Swansea, where the artist grew up. The painting features water-rimming bright green foliage through which we see peeks of a fluorescent orange sky, unusual coloration that appealed to Tinti's contemporary eye.

"Over the year leading up to the show I was watching for things that were very 21st century, that were shaking up the way that we think about landscapes" she said. "So they were using bold colors, there was some abstraction in the mix, they were using fractured interesting perspectives. They were placing the viewer at the center of the landscape and just prompting us to see the natural world in really different ways."

Among programs associated with "Land Ho!" is a gallery talk at 1:30 p.m. Nov. 1 during which artists Sally Curcio, Sandy Litchfield and Sue McNally will discuss the inspiration for their contemporary approaches to the landscape tradition.

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