

ART REVIEW

Painters go to different depths in Portland, Rockland shows

Works on view at the Alice Gauvin and Caldbeck galleries use varied approaches to creating dimension.

By JORGE S. ARANGO

In case it's escaped notice, there's so much going on this summer on the Maine art scene that, several times, I've written about multiple shows in one review to try to cover more of it.

Sometimes these shows have a common thread; other times not. At the most basic level, what connects "Activated Spaces" at Alice Gauvin Gallery in Portland and two shows at Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland – Lois Dodd's "Working Women and By the River" and the companion exhibitions "New Watercolors" (Al Critchton) and "New Work" (Brenda Free) – is painting. All close Sept. 11.

But these also offer an opportunity to contemplate how the illusion of depth, or lack of it, contributes to the work of various artists. "Activated Spaces" is, curatorially speaking, about the objects, color and light that the four artists on display – Sarah Lubin, Mark Milroy, Brian Rego and Gail Spaen – select and how they "activate" the spaces of their canvases. Yet the space itself is what intrigues me the most about this show.

Depth of space is a tricky matter. The illusion of it is a revered tradition, something that one-point perspective dramatically enhanced in the Renaissance. But many modern movements, particularly Pop art, eschewed space for a more flat, in-your-face countenance (behold Andy Warhol). Flatness can come off as cartoonish, which works when the association is cleverly exploited (Roy Lichtenstein), or when it adopts graphic art to comment on pop culture (Robert Indiana, Warhol).

At Gauvin (actually a pop-up of Nancy Margolis Gallery in New York), Spaen's work walks this exceedingly thin line. Her paintings – like Will Barnett's or Alex Katz's – come precariously close to graphic art in their flatness. They are pleasant scenes of idyllically composed views, usually looking out over a Maine seascape. There is a horizon line, but it never feels really that far in the distance. In "Observed Landscape #7," the jigsaw puzzle on the table inside the windows looks practically on the same plane as the glittering sea beyond it. She is pulling together favorite objects and forms – a rattan chair, a lighthouse, a tree – into quasi-utopian vistas that offer a respite from the thrum and buzz of our busy lives.

This technique could have been schmaltzy with more depth of field (just imagine the same scene painted by

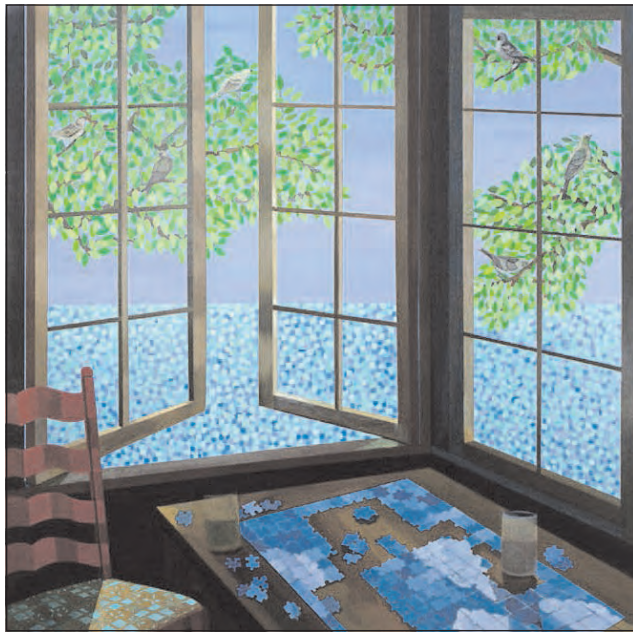


Photo by Luc Demers



Courtesy of the artist

Thomas Kinkade, for example). Yet here the flatness aligns Spaen's paintings more closely with both Japanese art – whether you're talking about Hokusai or Murakami's postmodern Superflat movement – and many forms of geometric abstraction, from Kasimir Malevich to Al Held (most evident in the interpretation of light glistening on the surface of the water as a sea of variously shaded squares).

Milroy displays more three dimensionality than Spaen, but then inserts something in the foreground that severely foreshortens the image. In the wonderfully odd painting "Last Day of Autumn," we see horsemen further back in the woods and a group of bizarrely colored, sculptural sawn tree trunks (as well as a horse head) through the flattening element of three trees in the foreground.

In his "Still Life with Snake," a clear reference to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, that troublesome asp curls atop a marvelously rendered slab of wood, which pulls the focus smack up to the surface.

In Lubin's paintings, foreground and background are

not only compressed, they fuse together in mind-bending ways. In "The Spoon," the body of a cat (which seems an obvious reference to Barnett) looks partially in front of fence-like grid, while the other half is behind it. The woman's face appears partially shaded behind a surreal, de Chirico-like glove, while her leg and boot seem parallel to the plane in which the glove exists.

In "Esplanade," a flower-dotted meadow moves from background to foreground by becoming the skirt of one of the subjects and the hat and face of another. A reclining figure at the "back" has a triangular head reminiscent of Lynn Chadwick's sculptures. Clearly Lubin is referencing a wide vocabulary of art history, meanwhile leaving the viewer fascinatingly suspended somewhere between planes.

In four of the six Rego paintings on display, depth becomes important as a tool for conveying a destabilizing sense of warped horizon or, as in "Encircled," eerily disquieting menace. In the latter, our perspective on a woman walking her dog is aerial. We might think the "en-



Courtesy of the artist



Courtesy of Alice Gauvin Gallery

Clockwise from top left: "Observed Landscape #7" by Gail Spaen, "Last Day of Autumn" by Mark Milroy, "Encircled" by Brian Rego and "Esplanade" by Sarah Lubin, displayed at Alice Gauvin Gallery in Portland.

circled" of the title refers to the trees that ring the seaside park she's in – until we notice the shadows of three birds circling her and see that she appears to be running away from them as she looks uncomfortably over her shoulder. The space between our overhead vantage point and the ground is suddenly filled with tension.

In "Fishing Day," "Girl on a Dock" and "Girl in a Garden," the horizon line bends, much like the view pilots see outside the cockpit, which appears to mirror the contour of the planet. It sets us visually spinning, especially when Rego inserts a flattening element (i.e., the dock), further confounding our perception of depth.

BACK – AND FRONT – STORY

Throughout most of her career, shallowness of perspective is what has given Lois Dodd's paintings their signature sense of enchanting matter-of-factness. There's no real mystery in her work; things are simply what they appear to be.

Dodd's distillation of form and elements flirt with abstraction in their simplicity, and color is laid down

without a lot of modulation. A cluster of brushstrokes in multiple shades of green coalesce effortlessly into "Spruce Seedling." A shadow within the folds of a sheet hung out to dry can be a quickly painted mix of gray, pink and yellow; shadows on her nudes a few purply brown streaks.

The nudes in this show, in particular, are disarmingly charming. "Woman with Axe" (2009) is, literally, little else. There is a pile of logs and a naked woman wielding her axe. The rest of the painting is just a field of mottled green, with no depth to speak of. This brings the preposterousness of the scene front and center at the same time that it asks, "What's so weird about a naked woman splitting wood?" There's more dimensionality in "Nude Sawing in House Frame" and "Nude with Blue Drape" (both 2002), but the trees in the distance are completely subservient to the action in the foreground, making the landscape almost perfunctorily functional.

Earlier paintings show more depth, which tells us that Dodd has been steadily simplifying and distill-

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Activated Spaces"
WHERE: Alice Gauvin Gallery, 43 York St., Portland
WHEN: Through Sept. 11
HOURS: Noon to 6 p.m. Thursday through Sunday, by appointment Wednesdays
ADMISSION: Free
INFO: 207-805-1707, alicegauvingallery.com

WHAT: "Working Women and By the River" (Lois Dodd), "New Watercolors" (Al Critchton) and "New Work" (Brenda Free)
WHERE: Caldbeck Gallery, 12 Elm St., Rockland
WHEN: Through Sept. 11
HOURS: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, 1-4 p.m. Sunday
ADMISSION: Free
INFO: 207-594-5935, caldbeck.com

ing with the passage of time. "Night Sky Between Buildings" probably has the greatest depth of perspective, with shadowed riverfront in the foreground, the water at middle range and a moody expansive sky clearly in the distance. This painting, from 1978, also has more expressionistic treatment of color, with many depths of shades bleeding into each other.

Even earlier nudes, as in "Three Nudes and Dog Underneath Trees," painted the same year, pays much more attention to painterly color application and perspective. In all of these, however, it is incredible to see how much Dodd can transmit with so little.

Brenda Free's acrylic paintings on paper are a curious phenomenon. Free's background is in graphic design for advertising, generally a field associated with images that are slick and shallow – both visually and conceptually. And certainly, her preoccupation with pattern might have roots there. However, the paradox is that the way she layers patterns atop patterns creates a tremendous sense of depth, whether that depth is one of shadow, ocean or landscape.

Free spent a decade living on a sailboat, which is evident in "Immersion" and "Slipway." The former's sense of depth is both vertical (we feel a descent into water from top to bottom) and spatial (the layering of aquatic plant forms form front to back). The latter refers to an inclined surface on which boats are repaired, built and/or launched – here depicted

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Spruce Seedling by Lois Dodd. Photo by Melanie Essex

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as a pink and maroon plane across the surface of the paper with blue and green ocean tones beneath it. Even “Finding Home” relates to life on the water in its depiction of an inlet meandering through bodies of land.

“Shade,” on the other hand, layers greens in a way that mimic the experience of looking deep into the shade cast by a tree, where plant forms in the most light-deprived recesses appear to be a darker green than those close to the break of light. In all her paintings, Free also scratches more patterns into the paint. Enigmatic symbols or figures can appear at any depth, from these surface scratches to bottom-most layers of color and pattern, creating a depth of meaning as well as space.

Crichton also tackles marine forms in the lovely watercolor “Deep Sea.” Here, however, anemones, coral forms and sea fans seem to have been laid out on top of the paper rather than existing in their watery environment. The liquid bleeds, speckles and washes of paint exist both in background and foreground, flattening perspective but nevertheless animating that perspective with visual effects.

Depth of field plays more of a role in landscape works such as one referred to in the handout as “Summer Uprising” (called “Sunrise” on Caldbeck’s website) and, especially, in the entrancing

“Lovely, Dark and Deep,” a horizontal view of sky through trees.

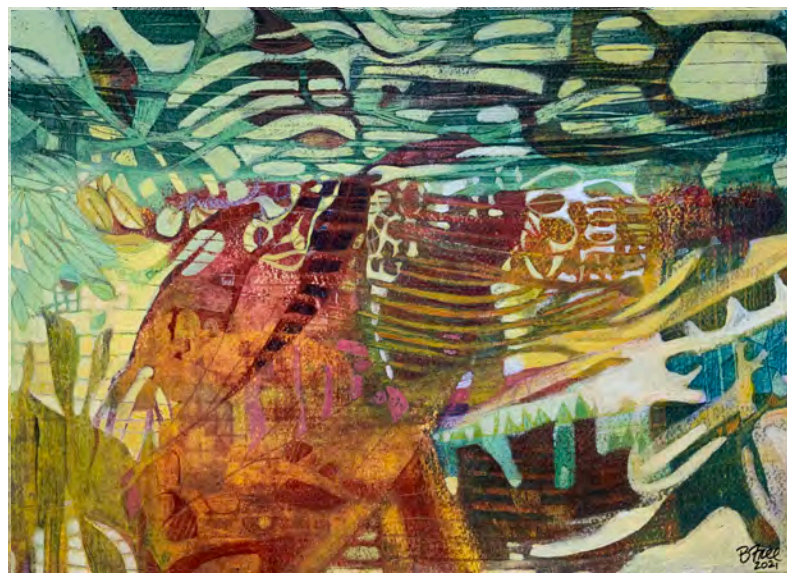
But the lack of depth in Crichton’s work is not at all a hindrance. In fact, what makes his paintings so irresistible is, first, their intimacy (they’re all 5 by 7 inches) and their tactility. That tactility begins with the paper and proceeds through the various ways Crichton applies color – stippling (“Family”), jotting (“Messenger”), washing (“Untitled”), cross-hatching (“Mother Earth is Really Pissed”) and so on. This creates a density of color that, because of these varied techniques, seems also to be dissolving the images as they come together. The resulting ephemerality is pure poetry.

Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland. He can be reached at: jorge@jsarango.com



At Rockland’s Caldbeck Gallery are, clockwise from left, Lois Dodd’s “Nude Sawing in House Frame,” Alan Crichton’s “Deep Sea” and Brenda Free’s “Immersion.” Dodd’s work emphasizes shallowness of perspective. The marine life in Crichton’s “Deep Sea” seems to exist outside the water, while Free’s decade spent living on a sailboat informs the patterns in “Immersion.”

Photo by Melanie Essex/ Caldbeck Gallery



Courtesy of the artist



Photo by Melanie Essex/Caldbeck Gallery