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Double feature at Moss Galleries: Otherworldly paintings and creative photographic riffs

Explore Nick Benfey's 'Light Springs' in Portland, while Rose Marasco reinterprets the work of Lynne Drexler at the show in Falmouth.

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Nick Benfey, "Bardo and New City," oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches *Images courtesy of the artists*

Moss Galleries has a great double feature going between its two outposts.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Nick Benfey: Light Springs"
WHERE: Elizabeth Moss Galleries, 100 Fore St., Portland
WHEN: Through July 15
HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday
ADMISSION: Free
INFO: 207-804-0459, elizabethmoss galleries.com

WHAT: "Rose Marasco: My Lynne Drexlers"
WHERE: Elizabeth Moss Galleries, 251 Route 1, Falmouth
WHEN: Through July 20
HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday

through Saturday
ADMISSION: Free
INFO: 207-781-2620,
elizabethmoss galleries.com

In Portland, “Nick Benfey: Light Springs” (through July 15) features the otherworldly paintings of a young artist who graduated from Bowdoin and now lives and works in Brooklyn.

In Falmouth, “Rose Marasco: My Lynne Drexlers” (through July 20) presents new work from a veteran photographer who once again confirms her ceaseless impulse for consistently turning out new and interesting work.

CONSIDERING SOURCE

Most mystical traditions hold as a central truth that all manifestation – from people and ideas to stars and galaxies – arises out of a mysterious unknowable depth of non-manifestation. Since at least college age, Benfey, whose grandfather was a Quaker and a chemist, has pursued his own drive to comprehend (and perhaps bridge) the quantifiable and the abstract through meditation, centering practices and, yes, the occasional Quaker meeting.

The concept of the exhibition’s title is rooted in this spiritual wisdom. “Light Springs,” reads his statement, “refers to our inner fountains, the vanishing sources from which our perspectives emerge, the lights and voices within that guide our way.” Anything and everything can emerge from that source or sources, and it encompasses both the strange and the beautiful. Indeed, both are present here, with some paintings pointing to a slightly disquieting limbo between two worlds or different dimensions of reality, while others feel more optimistic and joyous.

In the former camp is the marvelous “Bardo and New City,” in which the cosmos appears not at the top, but at the bottom of the painting. Out of this starry space rises a staircase leading to a Tolkienesque oecumene, or Middle-earth, bordered by a balustrade beyond which we see a seaside city with a rainbow arching over the water. There’s a little bit of Escher in this mind-warping perspective. Clearly, we are within the architecture of the mind, suspended in a kind of vertigo straddling at least two realities.

There is also a touch, Benfey admits, of El Greco in the treatment of the clouds at the upper left. Though art historical reference is not a major theme in Benfey’s work, the famed Greek artist of the Spanish Renaissance, whose characters always seem to be whirling and flying between heaven and earth, feels like an appropriate touchstone here.



Nick Benfey, "Blue Windows Behind the Stars," oil on canvas, 52 x 44 inches

"Blue Windows Behind the Stars" also flips our logic-seeking brains inside out. It shows the blue windows of one edifice that is parallel with the painting's surface. But coming out of it (or going into it) are six skyscrapers at a perpendicular angle that seem to impale the facade. What is going on here? The sense of inexplicability and lack of grounding allude to some parallel dimension beyond human existence.



Nick Benfey, "Pigeon City, Winter Sunset," oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches

At the other end of the spectrum are paintings like "Pigeon City, Winter Sunset" and "Bluebird's Imagination." The former impels the viewer to look at the world from a bird's-eye perspective. We see a flock of doves (which reminded me of another painter whose work inhabits a space between heaven and earth: Marc Chagall), soaring above a city of snow-covered rooftops, a blazing sunset overhead. There is something both ecstatic and eerie about the scene – ecstatic in the freedom of the flock's fast, balletic flights, yet eerie in the manner of Hitchcock's "The Birds." We wonder which is the more intelligent, dominant species: human or avian?



Nick Benfey, "Bluebird's Imagination," oil on canvas, 50 x 46 inches

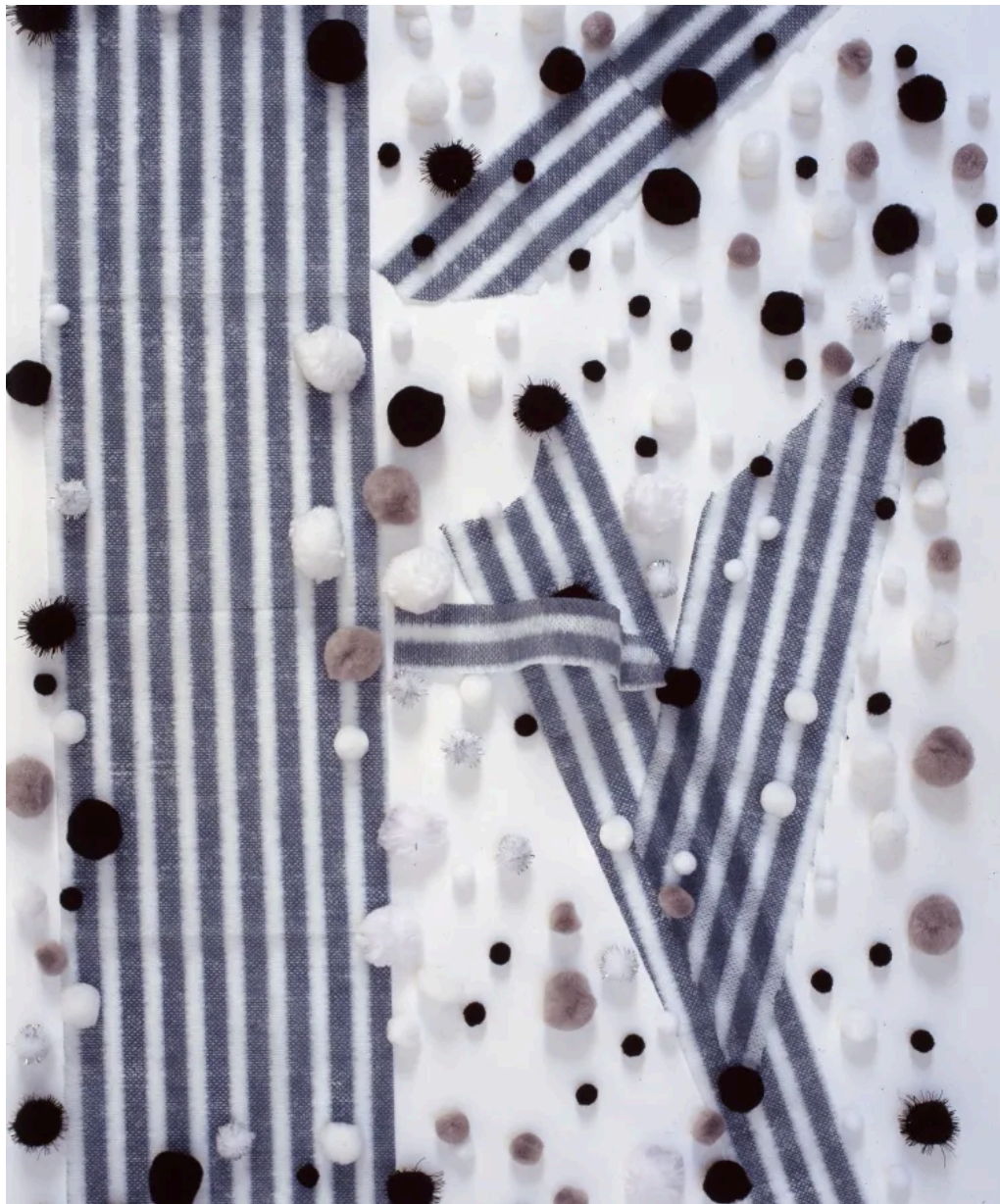
"Bluebird's Imagination" is more overtly joyous, a kind of reverie on what many of us know as the butterfly effect, which holds that the flapping of the insect's wings can cause reverberations eventually felt on the other side of the world. Rather than a butterfly, at the bottom of Benfey's canvas we see the vibratory waves that emanate from the central bird's flapping wings.

Moving upward, we swoop over pastures, roads, hills and a sky of clouds (this time casually referencing Thomas Hart Benton's vaporous atmospheric forms). Finally, at the top of the canvas we find various heavenly bodies (suns and/or stars) and the continuation of the vibratory waves that were set in motion below, the simple earthly flutter now an expanded energetic aura reaching the cosmos. We realize, too, that the lower rim of these heavens echoes the upper line of the bird's wingspan.

Benfey's new paintings are rich and beautiful and strange, capturing some of the unfathomable mystery of existence and its meaning. Even an apparently straightforward painting like "Greenwood Cemetery" hovers in that enigmatic space between living (it is lush with vegetation and the vibrations of urban life) and dying (the gravestones marking the transition to another experience of being).

REIMAGINING DREXLER

Rose Marasco, who is in her mid-70s, is a marvel. Possessed of apparently boundless energy and creative spirit, she flits from one photographic technique or conceptual interest to another. At Moss some years ago, she saw a show of Lynne Drexler paintings that left an impression. For this series of large-scale archival pigment prints, she took inspiration from several of those works, reinterpreting them in everyday objects she picked up at a dollar store while on an art residency in Virginia.



Rose Marasco, "My Lynne Drexler No. 6," 2024, archival pigment print, 41 x 34 1/2 inches

Some draw more literally on her source material than others. Most obvious is "My Lynne Drexler No. 6," which takes its cues from Drexler's "Winter Serenity," a monochromatic work from 1976 that Marasco faithfully channels using variously colored (black, white, silver, gray) pom-pom tassels and fabric swatches of a gray-blue and white striped textile. There is also "My Lynne Drexler No. 1," Marasco's version of "Jellied Sea." Here she employs bendable foam twist ties to recreate the L-shaped orange line in the Drexler and another blue twist tie shaped into an oval with two blue hair clips sitting in it to ape a blue oval of the painting. Yet the sea of Drexler's work is more loosely simulated through the use of paper, fabric, bobby pins and blue paracord.

Others are more like riffs that might pick up on the palette and certain gestures in the paintings, but improvise on the final composition. There are two such re-framings for Drexler's "Pink Red" of 1969: "No. 5A" – the more literal of the two, which adopts round and square deep red shapes at the lower right of Drexler's work – and "No. 5B," which seems to use the palette as jumping-off point for its own aesthetic journey.

Rose Marasco, "My Lynne Drexler No. 5A," 2024, Archival Pigment Print, 41 x 34 1/2 inches

These are delightful images, and there's a lot of fun in seeing how Marasco enlists all manner of unexpected objects to her end: jigsaw puzzle pieces, spools of thread, a protractor, popsicle sticks, pipe cleaners, clothespins, swatches of denim, Q-tips, plastic forks and on and on. But what many might not grasp is that Marasco is also making a serious point about the interrelatedness of drawing, printing, painting and photography.


Each of these art forms had ramifications for the others. The arbitrary cropping of early photography (along with Japanese woodblock prints widely circulated in the late 19th century), for instance, opened the door to compositional changes in painting, which suddenly took on flatter perspectives.

And it was the facilitated image reproduction of photography that partly begat Impressionism, which sought to distinguish itself from photography by elevating the raw texture of undiluted, thickly painted impasto. The ease photography offered for re-creating scenes and people was a counterpoint to the intensive labor of engraving, lithography and etching, which were replaced by the more modern art form in newspapers. And, certainly, taking a portrait with a camera was a lot less time-consuming and demanding than sitting for a painted portrait.

Marasco herself has drawn since childhood and, in her early college years, learned old-school printing techniques and graphic design. She also alludes to David Hockney's writings on the use by early painters – from Rembrandt to Canaletto to Vermeer – of camera obscura. Essentially, what Marasco does with these simulacra of Drexler's work is “draw” using common ephemera instead of a pencil or pen, then “prints” the image.

This work also traces its lineage to Marasco's own photographs of domestic objects as well as her “Mimics” series of photos, which used common objects – nails, clothespins, wallpaper, a paintbrush, etc. – to re-create images of nature she had taken in the early 2020s. So, there's a lot more subtext under the humor and wit of inventive simulation and impersonation.

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