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Think you know these Maine artists? See how they evolved at shows in Portland and Rockland

Triangle Gallery shows the work of artists in painting collective Seven, while Moss Galleries pairs Gail Spaien and Lynne Drexler.

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Jorge S. Arango

Two painting shows offer object lessons in why we should not get mired in strong positions about artists and their art (or ideologies, for that matter; something our leaders seem to forget).

“Roots & Wings” at Triangle Gallery in Rockland (through Nov. 30) beautifully illustrates how artists can develop. “Gail Spaien & Lynne Drexler: Light in Every Room” at Moss Galleries Portland (through Jan. 4) demonstrates how a felicitous pairing of artists changes our view of each’s work.

In either case, the message is clear: Holding obdurate opinions about what we like and dislike invariably limits our view.

MOVING RIGHT ALONG

Just over two years ago, I reviewed a show at the Maine Art Gallery in Wiscasset of a Maine painters’ collaborative called Seven. It actually showcased eight painters: Michel Droge and seven students of their painting course. The pleasure of “Roots & Wings” is witnessing how these artists’ work has evolved.

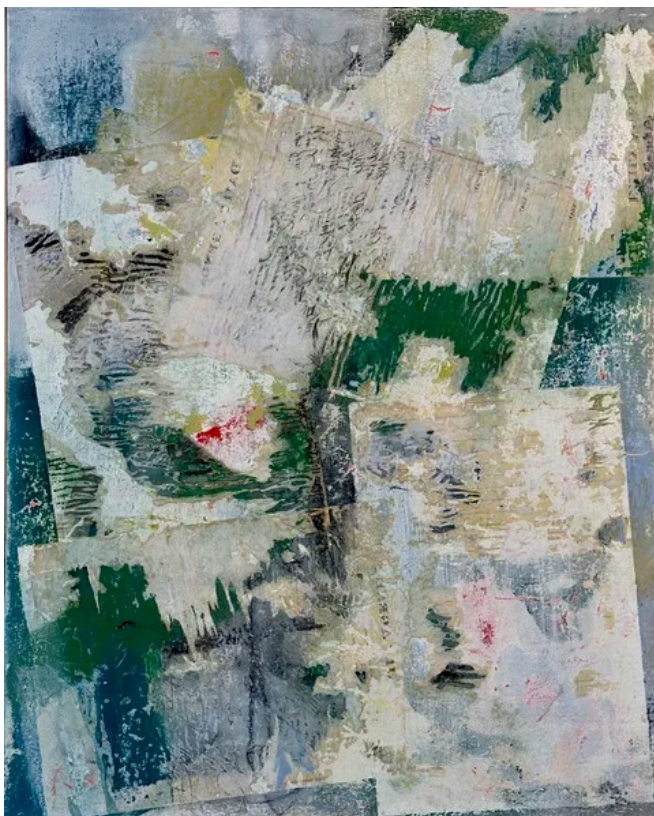
Take Celeste June Henriquez. According to her artist statement, she “paints gestural narratives that illustrate internal and external stories of relationships and environments.” This has remained true for years. Many of those narratives have had to do with the trials and rewards of raising a child with special needs, often featuring mother and child figures. There are works in this show in which we can discern this ongoing thread, particularly “Morning Dance,” in which mother and child perform the subject of the title. Or there is “Contemplation,” a painting from this year that depicts a woman – perhaps Henriquez – in a moment of quiet reflection.



Celeste June Henriquez, "Permanent Change," 2022, fabrics, paint, papers, stitching, 13" x 10" *Photo courtesy of Triangle Gallery*

But apparently Henriquez was doing work that was quantitatively different alongside this, some of it related to the theme of motherhood. There are three works from 2022 that incorporate papers, fabrics, paint and stitching. Their titles – "Meeting a Situation," "Best Laid Plans" and "Permanent Change" – can all be interpreted as having to do with a pregnancy that turned out differently from what one might have expected. The collaged elements of the former two clearly indicate a torso ("Meeting," in which we can also see a breast and a cut in the surface that indicates a woman's genitals) and/or a figure.

Though the subject may relate to her other work, the materiality of these is compelling, as is the fluidity Henriquez exhibits in combining textures and colors to compose interesting forms. And an undated septet of "SKINS" studies that greets us as we enter the gallery employ tea bag papers, paint, charcoal and pencil in fully abstract works. It would be interesting to know when these were made, as well as whether Henriquez meant them as representations of interior states (as I read them). The important realization, however, is this artist's diversity of expression, one that etched-in-stone notions only serve to unfairly pigeonhole.



Brenda Overstrom, "Erased," mixed media on panel, 30" x 24" *Photo courtesy of Triangle Gallery*

Brenda Overstrom is another revelation. In reviewing the previous Seven show, I had noted how some of her paintings had an affinity with those of Nancy Graves. Nothing here would give one that impression. Instead, Overstrom is working with words and phrases over which she paints, collages and sands to create textural richness, and also to partially obscure the words. We could draw parallels with artists like Glen Ligon and Christopher Wool, who also stencil phrases onto the canvas that break oddly, requiring closer scrutiny to decipher. Like Ligon, too, the obscuration of the words may

be interrogating not only their meaning, but the frequently empty substance of the ideas they articulate.

Yet Overstrom's deliquescent meanings seem unconcerned with politics and semiotics. She has said her words come from her dreams. What we are drawn to is the sense of tactility and profound depth her processes achieve. "Construct," for instance, seems to have a light source forcing its way from deep within that canvas to shine through the painting's foggy grays. Overstrom's techniques mirror her process of introspection by both shrouding and clarifying meaning.

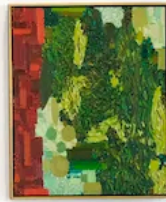
Doreen Nardone's work feels familiar to what I've seen. But the monochromatic palette of these works only strengthens her sense of form and composition. And her experimentation with larger scale ("Timeline" measures 50-by-60 inches) is simply spectacular. Droge's own work, too, seems to be evolving. For one thing, I have never seen them paint a figure, but there it is in "Hello," a work whose subject feels simultaneously powerful (especially the color palette and the skeletal hand) and inchoate, as if the figure is not quite sure about revealing itself. The show is full of similar surprises.

THE POWER OF TWO

Pairing Gail Spaien and Lynne Drexler is, frankly, inspired. These artists share many similarities. Though the late Drexler is currently an art market darling for her totally abstract paintings of the 1960s, she moved away from this style later in life and, like Spaien, concentrated more on domestic scenes and landscape. Both were influenced by the Pattern and Decoration Movement of the 1970s-1980s. Both eschewed prevalent trends of their times to pursue more idiosyncratic visions. Both women deconstructed phenomena into smaller component parts. And both appreciated American folk art (Drexler's exposure during her Virginia childhood led her to quilting and fabric collage in later years).

Which is not to say that their art looks anything alike. Drexler's feels dynamically in motion, while Spaien's feels serenely static. Drexler's compositions are loose and at times childlike, while Spaien's are meticulous and exacting. Spaien paints in a graphically flat, two-dimensional style, presenting all objects, it seems, on one or two planes, much like Japanese Ukiyo-e prints (she herself corroborates this influence). Most of Drexler's works in the show have depth of perspective, especially "Twin Sentinels," "Bayhead" and even one I did not care for, "Winter Arrangement," whose flat blue and green squares seem like a wall parting to reveal the vase of flowers behind.

But here's the thing: viewing them together gave me a whole new appreciation not only for Spaien, whose work I have liked but not really connected with until now, but also Drexler's later paintings, which I had thought lacked the complexity and sheer force of nature of her 1960s oeuvre. I will never look at either painter's work in the same way.



Gail Spaien, "Hearth," and Lynne Drexler, "Walled Shrub" Photo by Craig Becker

Sometimes the pairings are primarily driven by palette. Certainly this is the case with Spaien's "Hearth" and Drexler's "Walled Shrub." The latter is from 1968 and executed in the abstract style of that time. It embodies her teacher Hans Hofmann's "push-pull" theory, presenting the "wall" as a series of stacked squares in brown, russet and terra cotta, thus subtly evoking the hard, immovable boundary of a wall against the more organic, energetic strokes of the shrub, which is freer and wilder (on every level). In this way, it nods to the title's subject but remains resolutely abstract.

Yet "Walled Shrub" also shares some of the flatness of perspective of "Hearth," and Spaien reduces the sky to undulating areas of blue and black – not unlike the simplified abstract representation of the shrub – and the flames of the hearth become merely quick, single strokes of orange and pink. Drexler's painting is sumptuous and teeming. The effect this had next to Spaien's warm, idyllic domesticity was to elicit appreciation for Spaien's close and slow contemplation. Though "Walled Shrub" is a far smaller work, in this juxtaposition, next to Spaien's even-temperedness and symmetry, it comes off as almost bombastic.



Gail Spaien, "Lunch on the Porch," and Lynne Drexler, "Eventide" Photo by Craig Becker

There's more dialogue between Spaien's "Lunch on the Porch" and Drexler's "Eventide." Some of their synchronous elements include the suggestion of what is here and what is beyond being separated by a railing (in Spaien's painting) or fence (Drexler's); both painters' skies are pink and swirling (though Spaien has reduced the movement of air currents to a pattern of lines and curlicues); and both feature plants growing and climbing (except that Spaien's are obviously trained onto a supporting matrix by human hands and Drexler's sprout haphazardly, both climbing and flopping over).

But, in looking at Drexler's sky in "Eventide," I was overcome with admiration for the way Spaien depicted the light on the surface of the lake visible from the porch. Drexler's clouds are puffy and modulated, but Spaien's glistening effect of light on water – accomplished by breaking it into hundreds of squares – is even more astonishing. The technique itself is obsessively fastidious. However, if you really look closely at how she mixes minute squares of gray, lavender, pink and green to convey the sense of light raking across the ripples of the water's surface, you just can't help being spellbound.

I'm not always fond of Spaien's choices (the sky in "Untitled" or "Night Light," for example) yet I can respect their source in patterned fabrics or graphics. She makes her decision and sticks with it, just as Drexler unapologetically forged her own unique vision. We also see this predilection for pattern in Drexler's "Bayhead" and "Incandescent Meadow." The fact that I'm more attracted to the randomness of Drexler's patterns than I am at times to the uniformity of Spaien's does not diminish the decision on both their parts to exploit this sort of mark-making.

In any event, a painting like Spaien's "Light in Every Room" mixes up pattern in ingenious ways, imparting far more subtlety of light and shadow to the pattern play than this selection of Drexler's works achieve. And Spaien's sense of depth in this work elongates and deepens too. It is unabashedly fascinating to ricochet between these painters' canvases and understand how the works of one alters the view we have of the other.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Seven Collective: Roots & Wings”

WHERE: Triangle Gallery, 8 Elm St., Rockland

WHEN: Through Nov. 30

HOURS: Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, or by appointment

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-593-3800, trianglegallery8elm.com

WHAT: “Light in Every Room”


WHERE: Elizabeth Moss Galleries, 100 Fore St., Portland

WHEN: Through Jan. 4

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-804-0459, elizabethmossgalleries.com

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