

Art review: Between two exhibits, Cove Street Arts is here, there and everywhere

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By Jorge S. Arango

August 15, 2021



David Kapp, "Canal Street West," 72 x 72, 2017 *Photo courtesy of the artist*

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Here and There" and "Kindred"

WHERE: Cove Street Arts, 71 Cove St., Portland

WHEN: Through Sept. 4 (“Kindred”) and Sept. 11 (“Here and There”)

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-808-8911, covestreetarts.com

Two exhibitions at Cove Street Arts take different conceptual approaches to their subject matter, both of which offer riches.

“Here and There” (through Sept. 11) is varied, often wonderful and sometimes quite heady and intellectual. Curated by painter David Row, it presents work by 16 artists who, like Marsden Hartley and John Marin, maintained lively connections to the New York art scene (there) but recharged in Maine (here).

“Kindred” (through Sept. 4) is all soulfulness and heart. It features three beloved Maine artists – Alison Hildreth, Lissa Hunter and Tom Hall – engaging in an exquisitely numinous conversation about the unity of all things. It is a balm for our current human predicament, where a sense of unity of any kind remains frustratingly, even dangerously, elusive.

Several works in “Here and There” effectively convey the rhythms of New York. The crosstown thoroughfare of David Kapp’s quasi-abstract “Canal Street West” is easily discernible. But Kapp unearths the vibrational energies of moving cars and taxis, rushing people and the general round-the-clock restlessness of the city by viewing the scene from a vertiginous diagonal, as well as by employing a colorful palette and dynamically expressionistic brushstroke.



Yvonne Jacquette, "Galaxy of Night Lights," oil on canvas, 33" X 44", 2008 *Photo courtesy of the artist*

Yvonne Jacquette's "Galaxy of Night Lights" reproduces the familiar sparkle of city lights against a night sky. To accurately convey the glowing, indistinct aura of individual lights, she surrounds the central light source with a related, but muddier, color value so that each point seems to pulsate. And William Conlon's "Moxie" has a kinship with the work of Stuart Davis, who used a personal iconography of interactively dancing and colliding shapes to tap into the buzz and jittery cadences of urban life.

Conlon's work disorients us with its shifting sense of movement. Also disorienting, but increasingly fascinating the further we stand away from it, is Peter Soriano's "Schmelzwasser/Snow Melt." Up close it feels like a fairly straightforward presentation of flat geometry. But step back and it acquires a trippy dimensionality that messes with our sense of spatial relationships. You might swear the "inner" orange shape is rotating within the lines of the outer armature.

Two artists exhibit shaped-canvas works. The long list of painters who have explored their visual possibilities includes Ellsworth Kelly, Imi Knoebel, Robert Mangold, Barnett Newman and Richard Tuttle. But both David Row and Ken Greenleaf, the two featured here, bring something new to the game.

With the exception of Frank Stella's exploding shaped-canvas wall sculptures, most have used this medium to explore color and optical illusion, applying paint in flat or more splotchy fields of individual hues. Row, on the other hand, deeply scratches his surfaces to reveal their bright underpainting, conjuring a sense of depth and palpable texture that feel warm and approachable rather than cool and rational. This quality makes the razor precision of diagonal lines that bisect both "Straight Down Rain III" and "Red X" almost startling.

Greenleaf's "Monopoleum" and "Woolywig, Woolywig" walk an edge between sensation (achieved with mottled paint application and the soft intimacy with which his double canvases interlock) and conceptualism (more rational intersecting black-and-white geometries).

Greenleaf's works and Winston Roeth's "Rendezvous" provide the perfect segue into "Kindred" in the next gallery. Roeth states that his urge is "to turn the color into light." He does this by multiple layering of dry pigments mixed with glue and water. The more we stand in front of "Rendezvous," the more we feel like we're dissipating into a luminous cloud that is diffusing the blinding light of the sun. This touches a more metaphysical dimension that connects right into the transcendental aura of "Kindred."



Lissa Hunter, "100 Spoons," installation 2020-2021 *Photo courtesy of the artist*

All the works in "Kindred" seem to exist outside of time. At a fundamental level, they all appreciate and emanate shared connection at many levels of existence and experience. Lissa Hunter presents an installation and a series of small-scale wall sculptures, as well as

two-dimensional works, that emphasize our shared humanity through her use of ubiquitously utilitarian objects.

She starts us off with an installation of 100 hand-carved spoons, the assembled presence of which conveys unity of both form and human experience. But each spoon retains its indestructible particularity through unique material combinations, the specific depth and shape of its bowl, or the singular twist of its handle. They are worth considerable contemplation on their own.

Several of her small sculptures feature boat-like shapes that address journeys of many kinds. “Founder,” where boats look tossed onto rocks, could refer to settlers in new lands. “Parched” might imply a journey stalled in the desert. “In Search of Truth,” with its ladder leading out of a skiff toward the heavens, is almost surely about the spiritual journey toward transcendence and/or the passage from life to afterlife.

Bowls in other sculptures metaphorically suggest life-giving nourishment and renewal. And brush sculptures executed in porcelain, wire, waxed linen thread, goat hair and paint exalt the beauty of an object and its materiality while simultaneously acknowledging that beauty – of youth, existence, human life – is ephemeral, always swept away in the end. Hunter’s work is quiet, meditative and poignant, affecting in its accessible tactility yet articulating immensely mysterious truths that are often beyond normal comprehension.



Tom Hall, "Monhegan Inn III," mixed media on canvas, 22" x 22", 2021 *Photo courtesy of the artist*

The unifying force of Tom Hall's gorgeous paintings is, reads his statement, "beauty...pure and simple...no hocus pocus." Beauty is denigrated by many. But as the art critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote in a 1998 essay: "(Real beauty) always resembles a conversion experience ... The merely attractive (pretty, glamorous) and merely pleasing (lovely, delectable) are not beauty, because they lack the element of belief and the feeling of awe that announce it. The attractive or pleasing enhance the flow of my feelings. The beautiful halts the flow, which recommences in a changed direction."

That is what Hall's paintings do. "Beauty," he writes, "by its very nature implies integration, resolution of conflict, empathy and love." Their affect is like sepia-toned photography from another era – nostalgic but not sentimental, romantic but deeply brooding – or of Corot's

woozy, dreamlike gray landscapes. They are not tidily realistic. Though the landmarks of Monhegan Island – the inn, the island’s lone red house, the Rockwell Kent house – are familiar, they also feel blurry and of another dimension just beyond reach.

Drops of paint on the lush surfaces were initially accidental drips that occurred as Hall moved around canvases laid flat, rather than on an easel. But he realized this unintentional messiness enhanced the paintings in some way. For me, they recall the flecked, grainy reel-to-reel film footage that counted down seconds to the feature, which further dislocates these lyrical scenes from our present moment.

Hildreth then takes us into the cosmos. Her statement says her initial intent was “to do a series exploring the meanderings of fungi,” which form connective networks underground that can sprawl undetected for miles. Intricately complex works like “Fleures du Mal” and an untitled piece from 2021 on kitkato paper certainly appear to chart these systems.

But as many of the titles imply, they can just as easily evoke the cracking and crumbling of our exterior facades or ideals (“Things Fall Apart”), the inundation of deltas (“Flood”), growth (“Tree”), or galaxies of stars and planets (“Outside Light I” and “Outside Light II,” which resemble astronomical maps).

There is interconnectedness in all these phenomena. But there is also dissonance and a sense of something out of balance. “A Tear in the Fabric I and III” and “The Stars Fall Down in Fright,” all oil paintings on linen, are cautionary works that express humanity’s more corrosive effects on the environment and the larger universe. Like Hall’s works, they unify through beauty. But that beauty can be disturbing.

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