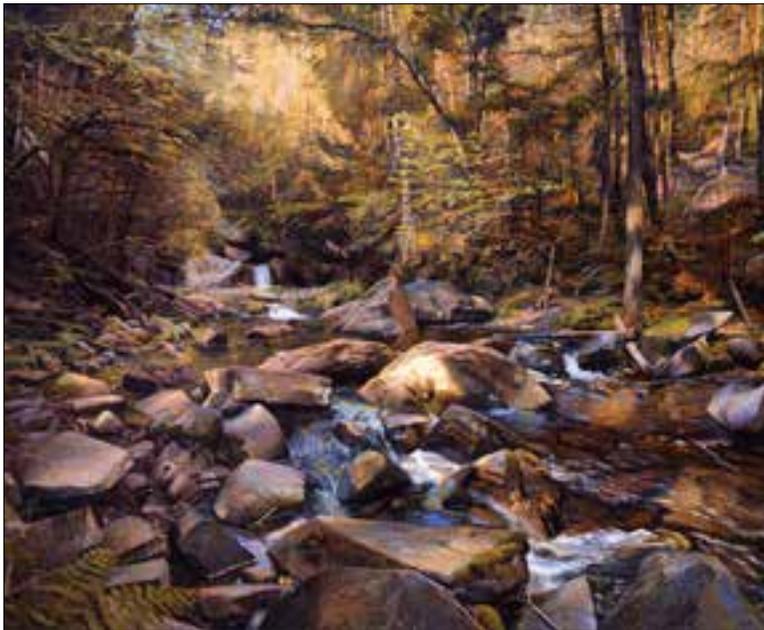


Realism in Maine: A Continuing Tradition

by Stephen May

Over the years, the State of Maine has been a magnet for artists, both native-born and from elsewhere, attracted by everything from its rocky coast and picturesque islands and towns to its soaring mountains, primeval forests and abundant natural landscape, and hardy, resilient residents. American landscape artists who have painted in Maine include such luminaries as native sons Eastman Johnson and Marsden Hartley, as well as Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, Fitz Henry Lane, George Bellows, Edward Hopper and Rockwell Kent, and contemporary painters Lois Dodd, Alex Katz and Richard Estes. Three generations of Wyeths—N.C., Andrew and Jamie—have recorded views of the state in exemplary fashion.¹

A constant among most of these painters has been their commitment to representational imagery. No matter how abstractly a few have painted elsewhere, there is something special about Maine that impels artists to paint it in a realistic style.² Perhaps it is the solid, elemental natural beauty of its coastline and interior terrain, perhaps the immediacy of pristine skies and unspoiled nature, perhaps the unpredictability of weather, subject to Mother Nature's most varied moods. Whatever the cause, painters seem encouraged to boil their works down to fundamentals, to elemental forms that evoke the essentials



Joel Babb, *Hagas Brook*, 2009, VOSE GALLERIES, BOSTON

of Maine's natural world. As Maine art authority Carl Little puts it, the state "confers on those who paint its landscapes a clear-eyed breadth of view not available anywhere else. Add a stunning and multifarious topography to this clarity of vision, and you've got a *plein air* painter's paradise."³

A number of talented painters continue the tradition of Maine realism in their own individual manner. Among the best are Joel Babb, Frederic Kellogg, Sarah Knock, Loretta Krupinski and David Vickery. All but Vickery are non-natives, and all but Kellogg live in Maine year-round. Last summer I visited these talented artists in their studios and talked to them about the challenges and rewards of painting in Maine. All were enthusiastic about the bounty of subjects available: several thousand miles of craggy coastline; scores of islands, big and small; a storied maritime history; innumerable placid lakes; mighty rivers; farms and forests, often as far as the eye can see, and quaint villages and isolated homes that house sturdy, hard-working men and women.⁴ They expressed concern about the threat of encroaching civilization—including the incursion of summer people—on this natural world, chipping away at Maine's spell. Each is dedicated to continuing to paint in their adopted state, some year-round, some in the summer.

Each seems to follow the example of painter John McCoy. Christopher Crosman, longtime director of Rockland, Maine's Farnsworth Art Museum, once observed that McCoy was "aware of but independent from avant-garde styles, especially Abstract Expressionism," but "continued a longstanding tradition of American realism that has its roots in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. It is a transcendent, spiritually evocative, and intensely personal response to the natural world through a man's place therein."⁵

Joel Babb (b. 1947) has gained a dedicated following for his paintings of hushed woodlands and brooks in western Maine, and his powerful views of massive rocks meeting the sea along the state's extensive Atlantic coastline. An avid student of art history, his is a classic, almost Ruskinian realism, usually devoid of human presence, involving meticulously rendered views that evoke grandeur, silence and spirituality in the manner of the Hudson River School landscapists. Babb's Maine tends to be an Edenic place, with the kind of pristine environment that still abounds, but is under constant threat from development and other forms of human exploitation. These works reflect a renewed commitment to *plein-air* painting, which the artist finds has refreshed and reinvigorated his oeuvre.

Babb majored in art history at Princeton, where he experimented with dreamy paintings in the Abstract Expressionist manner. Sketching and painting whenever he could, he found himself unwilling to ignore the lessons of tradition. As his biographer Carl Little puts it, Babb "found himself pulled between a desire to practice modern art and a growing passion for the past."⁶ After graduating from Princeton, Babb spent time in Germany and Italy. He drew images of architecture and sculpture in Rome, and immersed himself in the

clear, orderly landscapes of Claude Lorrain and Nicholas Poussin. Returning to the United States, Babb studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and worked as a night watchman at the museum, which enabled him to roam the galleries with his sketchbook. Armed with an M.F.A., he taught a variety of painting and drawing classes around Boston, while painting on the side. Seeking to incorporate approaches from the old masters into his work, he “gradually...evolved the goal of painting modern subjects that had the look of an eighteenth-century style, ‘as if Thomas Gainsborough had come back to life and painted contemporary scenes.’”⁷

In the 1970s, Babb started visiting western Maine, eventually cobbling together a house and studio in the woods and settling permanently in Buckfield. His painted forest interiors, often punctuated by rock-strewn brooks, such as *Hagas Brook* (2009), are based on sketches and drawings made during walks from his home/studio. These woodland scenes, hushed and peaceful, recreate with remarkable detail and accuracy cycles of growth and decay (sprouting plants, toppled trees, fallen leaves), the dynamics of moving water, and complex patterns of sunlight on boulders, trees and streams. “One is completely enmeshed in the forest interior,” says Babb.⁸ The artist brings the same unerring touch to depictions of Maine’s craggy coastline, with meticulously delineated rocks, spindly fir trees, blue ocean water and cloud-specked skies, adding up to compositions overflowing with verisimilitude and appeal. It’s a kind of painterly photorealism that is the next best thing to being there.

Frederic Kellogg (b. 1942) is a man of many parts—lawyer, teacher and artist. Dividing his time between Washington, D.C., and Thomaston in midcoast Maine, he works in oils and watercolors to create memorable images based on ordinary subjects, such as crowded urban streetscapes of the nation’s capitol or quiet scenes of rural Maine. Kellogg has given much thought to the potential of contemporary realism, influenced by historic painters ranging from Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins to Fairfield Porter, Edward Hopper, Andrew Wyeth and Robert Bechtle. His ultra-representational *Penn Williamson in a Single Shell* (1999), showing a friend rowing under a Maine bridge, was inspired by Eakins’s celebrated *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull* (1871), but has modern hard edges of bright sunlight and deep shadow. In a bow to the tradition of history painting, *The Rescue of Ensign Gay*, Kellogg recorded the rescue of a downed flier during World War II’s Battle of Midway. In an ingenious touch, he painted himself standing to the side and looking on, seemingly menaced by a shark—recalling John Singleton Copley’s iconic *Watson and the Shark* (1778).

Kellogg was born in Boston and raised in Cambridge, with summers in midcoast Maine. In the late 1980s, he decided to pursue a professional art career, studying painting, printmaking and other media at the Washington Studio School. Kellogg paints on the top floor of a Washington, D.C., townhouse near Dupont Circle and, since 1995, in the top of a barn attached to an 1848 sailmaker’s house in Thomaston. He was attracted to the house because



Frederic Kellogg, *Penn Williamson in a Single Shell*, 1999
PRIVATE COLLECTION

it was “Hopperesque, especially its bay window. It had great horizon and water views, both of which I wanted.”⁹ The high elevation and great natural light through large windows overlooking the St. George River and railroad tracks have made it an ideal workspace.

Committed to a representational vocabulary, Kellogg has been challenged by the impact of photography as an artform, as well as the innovations of mid-twentieth-century Abstract Expressionism and its aftermath. “Realism has to find a new legitimacy,” he says. “It demonstrates what only painting can do in helping people to see what is around them but with new techniques and innovative approaches.”¹⁰ Some of his finest work has been done literally from his Thomaston front yard, notably *November, Elliot Street* (1999), a view of houses just up the street from his in-town home, bathed in a sunlight that would make Hopper proud. He brings the same thoughtful, even poetic touch to serene, crisp depictions of bowling alleys, car tail-lights on a nocturnal highway, gas stations, laundromats and pay phones, bringing the ordinary that we take for granted to life. They conjure up Ed Ruscha’s rigorous geometric shapes.

For a softer look, Kellogg employs watercolor to splendid effect, whether showing fir trees silhouetted against a lake or the ocean, a birch tree climbing to the sky, a classic white Maine mansion (painted to similarly evocative effect by Hopper in 1926) or a sunset over a Maine coastal island. The latter, with its light touch and broad swatches of muted colors, puts one in mind of Homer’s watercolors. Kellogg has a facility in oil and watercolor, a keen eye for paintable images and astute compositions, and the ability to change styles to suit his subjects. As art historian Susan C. Larkin puts it, Kellogg “is at heart a realist

but is too much the poet to merely record the passing scene. He is a thoughtful man, one who probes and ponders, one who tries to uncover, albeit gently, the unseen character of everyday things.”¹¹

A Michigan native who moved to Maine thirty years ago, Sarah Knock (b. 1947) has a lifelong, “real emotional connection to water,”¹² particularly reflections in it. She has made a career of painting water wherever she goes. At the University of Michigan, where she majored in English and education, she took up photography and pursued that interest as she moved around in the Midwest and New England. When her interests turned to painting, she earned a B.F.A. from Boston University, where she learned the traditional basics of figure studies, painting, drawing and sculpture. During a transitional period, she made paintings based on old tintypes she found in antiques stores.

In the summer of 1989, a six-week residency at Carina House on Monhegan Island, sponsored by the Farnsworth Art Museum, turned her on to the rugged island’s landscape and the water around it. Her stay, she says, “set up an intense passion for the coast....I found myself longing to be on or near the water on a daily basis.”¹³ She began seeking water views for subjects wherever she could find them, taking ferries to islands and driving along the Maine coast. Her early paintings were often seascapes painted from a land or island perspective. Moving to a new house in Freeport, Maine, on the coast, she found that kayaking offered “a new and exciting perspective,” and started concentrating on the “water surface, reflections, and sometimes what is below the surface.” The latter, she notes, “feels like a more intimate encounter with Nature than my earlier paintings that focused on deep space.”¹⁴

Some of her works include shoreline landscapes, while others focus on shimmering surfaces and the ocean floor in clear, shallow water. In *Just Water*, a 40-by-30-inch oil that depicts only water, with no land in sight, she masterfully makes the rippled surface into a compelling, appealing image. Her pictures tend to be more expressive and abstract than they may seem at first; indeed, her style might best be called expressive realism. Her views are not as illusionistic as you might expect: space is flattened, and water reflections dissolve into patterns.

Because of the difficulties of sketching in a kayak, Knock uses photography to jog her memory when she returns to her studio on the second floor of her waterfront home, where she often works on five paintings at a time. Her pictures are never literal, but are based on a combination of photos, drawings and her own sense of color and composition. “[W]ater is a vehicle to explore the abstract quality of patterns and reflections,” she says. “I am most interested in trying to understand what I am seeing by drawing and connecting forms until I feel a sense of resolution.” Beyond drawing, her “primary focus is color relationships.”¹⁵ The results are rich, evocative water views in which crisply delineated shorefront houses, warehouses, docks, lobster traps and boats are wonderfully reflected in blue, purple and white rippling water. In a striking

series, the underside of a well-worn dock is mirrored in deep blue, undulating water. *Dock—Three Sections* (2005) is a vibrant example. Images of fir-covered, rocky islands glimpsed at kayak/water level will look familiar to anyone who has spent time along Maine’s elongated coastline. Particularly beautiful are Knock’s nocturnes: sunrise and sunset views of islands glimpsed over expanses of sea tinged with the orange of the sun, such as *July Sunset*, *Sunrise with Ice Glaze* and *Sisters Island*.

Loretta Krupinski (b. 1940) is one of the few Maine artists who specializes in historical paintings. Her home/studio overlooks the St. George River. A graduate of Syracuse University, she worked for many years as a graphic designer and continues as an author and illustrator of children’s books—twenty-seven titles so far. An avid sailor, Krupinski became interested in historical paintings of the maritime industry after moving to coastal Maine. Using vintage photographs from historical societies and museums, she has recorded facets of a past way of life in seaports ranging from Belfast to Bath. She brings archival black-and-white images to life in carefully researched, vibrantly colored, painstakingly detailed compositions.

Krupinski begins with a small gouache study and then makes choices of local color. On canvas she starts with an underpainting of burnt sienna and then meticulously applies glazes of hues that recreate the style of the period. She utilizes subtle tonal and color touches to capture precisely detailed surfaces, both natural and man-made. She is obsessive about accuracy, devoting much time to research and interviews with nautical experts. Her research involves everything from rigging and fishing gear to boat plans and clothing styles. Forty of her finest works were brought together in *Looking Astern: An Artist’s View of Maine’s Historic Working Waterfronts*, published in 2010.¹⁶ In the



Sarah Knock, *Dock—Three Sections*, 2005, PRIVATE COLLECTION

text accompanying her pictures, she provides fascinating details of Maine's coastal life in the decades, roughly 1850s to 1940s, when fishing, shipbuilding and quarrying were the backbone of the shorefront economy.¹⁷

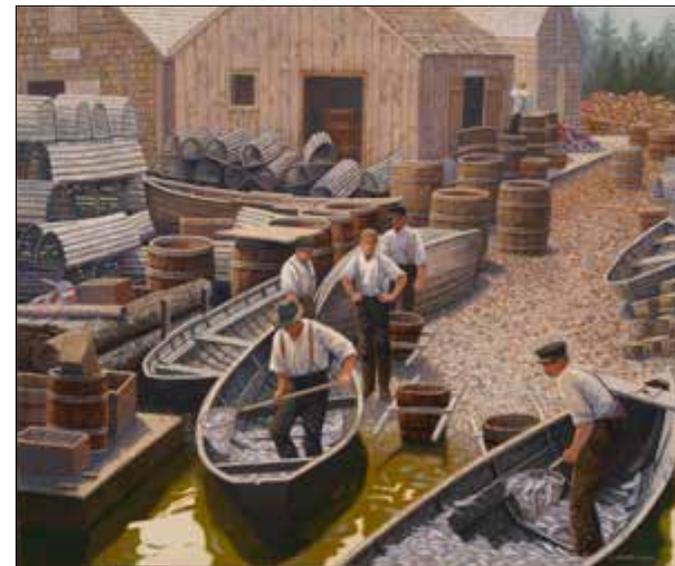
Krupinski's *Bringing Home the Herring* (2012) depicts Matinicus Island fishermen in 1913 unloading their catch from dories into storage barrels. Reflecting her skill as an illustrator, the scene has a storybook clarity. By 1915, in a bird's-eye view of Rockland Harbor, *The Herring Car*, a mix of old sailing dories jostle for space with early inboard motorboats, as fishermen unload herring into a floating pen (known as a "car"). In a beautiful moonlit painting, Krupinski shows two fishermen working as a team to haul in seines of herring, typical of the grueling manual labor required in 1940—and today. *Waiting for Trap Day*, set on Monhegan Island in 1899, shows old-time wooden lobster traps piled up on shore, awaiting Trap Day—the day in early January when local lobstermen have agreed to begin setting out traps. In homage to Maine's intrepid fishermen, *Time Out on the Madeline and Flora*, set in Rockland Harbor in 1938, shows seven members of the hardy crew of this shrimp boat during a rare moment of leisure. The next year, Krupinski reports, the boat was lost at sea, and none of the crew was ever found.

In many pictures, historically accurate, barn-red structures provide a handsome backdrop for the visiting vessels. Inspired by three generations of Wyeths and Rockwell Kent, and surrounded in her home by maritime art and ship models, Krupinski remains enthusiastic about her historical works. "I think I'm helping to preserve a part of history that is gradually disappearing—classic wooden sailing yachts, working harbors and fishermen at work" [unaided by modern devices], she says. She relishes the sense of "stepping back in time, stepping inside my painting." To be a marine artist, she adds, you



David Vickery, *Red House at Dusk*, 2012

COLLECTION OF DR. JOHN HALLETT, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA



Loretta Krupinski
*Bringing Home the
Herring (Matinicus,
Maine, 1913)*, 2012
ARTIST'S COLLECTION

have to be a "wharf rat"—liking the water in all kinds of weather, and knowing clouds, wind, lighting, water conditions, sailing conditions and boat designs."¹⁸

David Vickery (b. 1964), the youngest of this group of Maine representational artists, has already attracted many admirers for what he calls his "precise realism." Utilizing Hopperesque light, he paints scenes of midcoast Maine: rock formations, churning sea, houses, doorways and backyards, angular interiors, lawn mowers and shopping center parking lots. "My work," he says, "is about the merger of nature and culture—an attempt to make sense of our place in the world. I look at interior spaces and our imprint on the landscape with an eye for the imperfect, quirky, and sometimes elegant adaptations we've made in order to live here."¹⁹

Born and brought up in Newtown, Connecticut, he summered in Maine, experimented with large-scale photography and thought of going into the building/woodworking business. After taking painting, drawing and art history courses at the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine, he became a full-time painter in 1992. He built a house, a small gallery to show his work and a snug, light-filled studio on two acres in Cushing, Maine—overlooking a cove and near the Olson House, subject of Andrew Wyeth's celebrated *Christina's World*. Wyeth, he says, was an early influence, but less so now. He is an admirer of Hopper's use of light, Estes's "dead-pan realism," Rockwell Kent and his summer neighbor, Lois Dodd. Reproductions pinned to the wall of his studio reflect his interest in Dürer, van Eyck and Holbein, among others.

Vickery likes scenes with an edge. When painting house interiors, he looks for geometric and psychological qualities. The almost vertiginous views up and down stairways in several Maine houses recall Charles Sheeler's paintings. His

deft feel for light is showcased in paintings of the inside of his house, notably a brightly lit depiction of his dining room's simple table and chairs. *Power Outage* depicts the same scene, but in dramatic candlelight when the power has been shut off. "I was going around blowing out the candles before going to bed," he recalls, "when it struck me that this was a scene that I should paint."²⁰ The result is an eerily glowing 14-by-11-inch oil on panel, the scene subtly illuminated by several candles and conveying hints of mystery and tension. Equally striking is *Red House at Dusk* (2012), a nocturnal painting of a red house on Monhegan Island. The porch is brilliantly lit, offering a stark contrast with the darkened landscape and boats in the adjacent harbor. In a similar vein, *Little Island* shows a tiny island below his house illuminated by moonlit reflections on the water. Such works demonstrate the artist's joy at seeing and painting points at which the optical and psychological meet.

An avid skier, Vickery relishes painting Maine in the grip of winter. *Arctic Maine*, with its expansive cloud-filled sky, snow-capped rocks and icy water, is an homage to the glories of winter in the Pine Tree State. One of Vickery's finest works, sited on Monhegan, is *Day Trippers*, a 30-by-40-inch oil, which looks up over a vast expanse of rocky terrain to three tiny figures exploring the topography. It is a wonderful evocation of the natural beauty and man's insignificance amidst nature's creations on the island. Vickery's is the kind of precise yet painterly realism that will sustain interest in his work and leave significant images of man and nature in Maine for posterity.

The work of Babb, Kellogg, Knock, Krupinski and Vickery confirms Maine's predilection for nourishing realism. Offering fresh perspectives on a rich variety of representational imagery, they continue a vital, time-honored tradition.

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NOTES

1. Writing in *Paintings of Maine* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1991), p. 22, Carl Little observes that "All three [Wyeths] represent the vital vein of realism in Maine painting, one which forcefully reproduces nature and figures as they exist in real life, with a large dose of poetic romanticism added to help them carry them into the realm of the larger-than-life."
2. As art historian John I.H. Bauer once observed about Marguerite and William Zorach, who tried to apply modernist styles to the Maine landscape, they ended up "working in a more traditional manner after a few years in the state—tamed, as it were, by the head-on-power of the environment." Bauer, in *Maine and Its Role in American Art*, paraphrased by Carl Little in *ibid.*, p. 21.

3. Little, *ibid.*, p. 6.
4. As Maine cultural commentator Lou Dietz wrote a quarter century ago, "Maine was and still is a frontier. Maine people continue to be engaged in a battle with nature and an austere environment." *Night Train at Wiscasset Station* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), quoted in Little, *ibid.*, p. 22.
5. Crosman in exhibition brochure for "John W. McCoy 1910–1989: A Retrospective," at Dowling Walsh Gallery, Rockland, Maine, 2012, p. 2.
6. Little, *Nature and Culture: The Art of Joel Babb* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2012), p. 19. This is a thorough, excellent monograph about the artist.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
9. Quoted in *American Artist* (November 2000), p. 82.
10. Quoted in undated handout, Caldbeck Gallery, Rockland, Maine.
11. Larsen, exhibition brochure for Kellogg exhibition at Nan Mulford Gallery, Rockland, Maine, 2002, p. 2.
12. Interview with author, Freeport, Maine, August 28, 2012.
13. Quoted in *Carina House: The First Decade, 1989–1999*, at Farnsworth Art Museum, 1999, p. 13.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Undated artist's statement.
16. (Camden, Maine: Down East, 2010).
17. Readers learn, for example, that Maine stood apart from other New England states because it had ready access to limestone and granite and shipbuilding skills and facilities. "Maine built more ships by total tonnage than any other state on the East Coast, and by 1855, a third of the vessels produced in the United States were built there." *Ibid.*, p. 10.
18. Interview with author, South Thomaston, September 4, 2012.
19. Statement on artist's website, 2013.
20. Interview with author, Cushing, Maine, September 10, 2012.

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