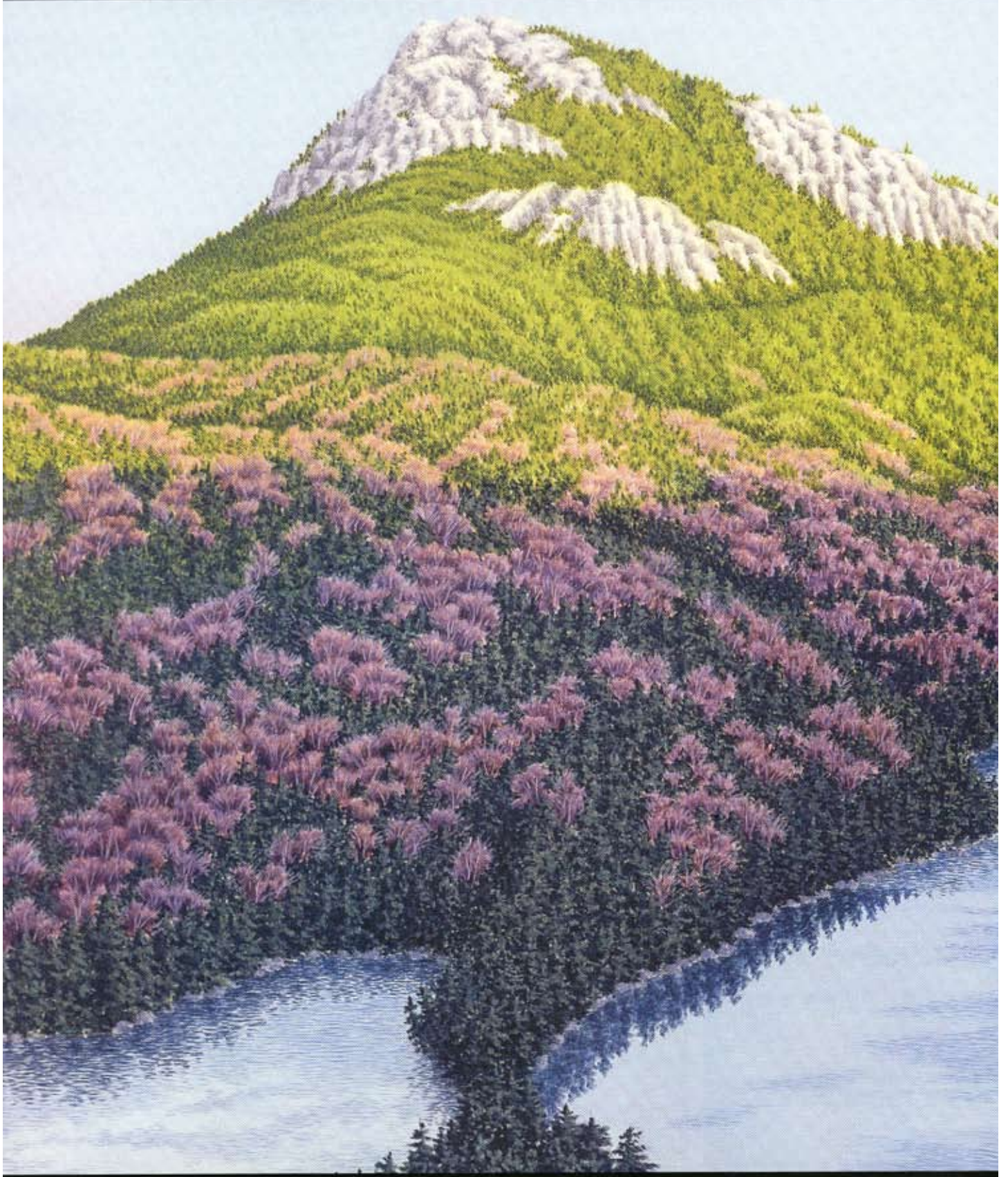


A Passion for Place



ALAN BRAY

His ties to Piscataquis County have led to the painting of remarkable landscapes and to national recognition.

BY CARL LITTLE

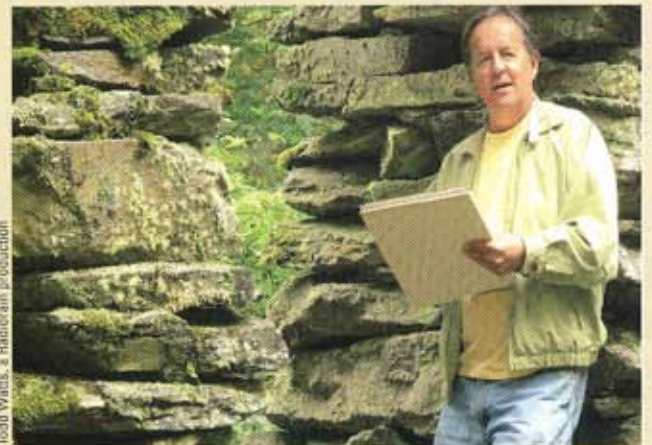


Urban Nest, 2006

WHILE RECOVERING from a minor heart attack in 1998, painter Alan Bray began taking walks behind his home at Hall's Christmas Tree Farm in Sangerville. He would pass a pile of rocks—the kind, he said, that you find on any farm—a loose assortment of stones collected around “one huge immovable boulder.” He began to arrange the rocks, first making a circle, then building them into a chimney-shaped stack.

That stack of stones stands not far from the highest point of land on the farm, a hillock where the ashes of Bray's father-in-law, Don Hall, were spread in 1992. Hall had been a second father to the artist and a role model. “He was the first man I had ever met who absolutely loved what he was doing,” Bray said. “He'd be out on a tractor at five in the morning singing at the top of his lungs.”

Viewing the painting *Don Hall's Cairn, 2007*, one need



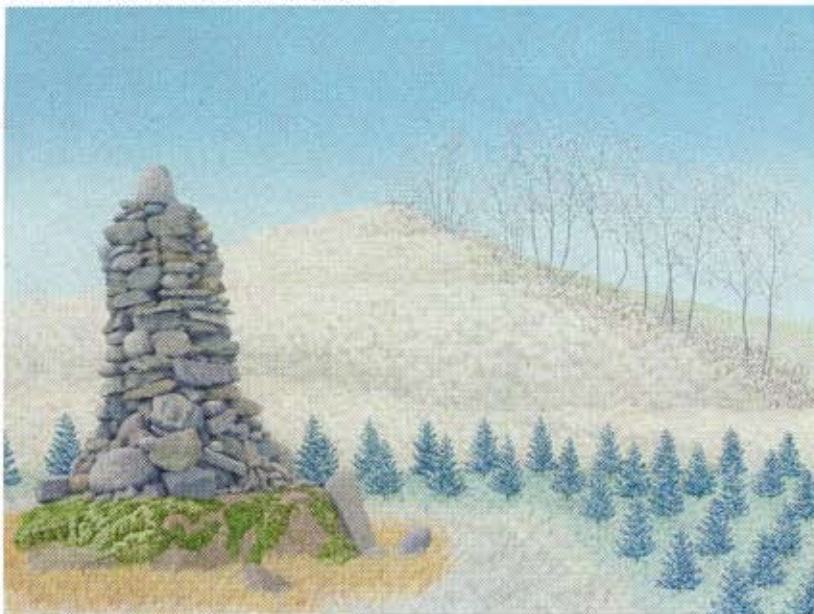
Todd Wais, a Raintain production





Fine Sta

Don Hall's Cairn, 2007, Courtesy Caldbeck Gallery, Rockland.



not know the story of the cairn's construction to appreciate the beauty of the image, the small balsam firs surrounding the makeshift monument that reaches into a pale sky. Yet that special narrative underscores the intimate connection Bray makes to everything he paints. Such ties, the artist attests, are requisite to his work.

At least twice Bray has tried to paint a place that he knew only as a visitor. Trips to England on a grant from Earthwatch and to Newfoundland to view the northern terminus of the Appalachian Mountains might have provided new and exciting subject matter, yet even with studies in hand, Bray found himself unable to proceed. By contrast, a personal knowledge of his home territory in southern Piscataquis County continues to inspire some of the most original paintings by an American of his generation.

Born in 1946, Bray grew up in Monson and, aside from a few years in Waterville, spent his boyhood and adolescence exploring the woods, ponds, and fields of the town with his father and two brothers. He became intimately familiar with the local landmarks—Borestone Mountain, Wilson Falls, Punchbowl Pond, Monson’s famous slate quarries—but also discovered the out-of-the-way places known only to locals.

As an artist Bray began responding to these special places while studying for a master’s degree at the Villa Schifanoia School of Fine Arts in Florence, Italy, in 1972-1973. Traveling by motorbike to different towns and cities, including Urbino, his favorite, he fell in love with the frescoes and panel paintings in churches and city halls, and developed a special fascination for the late medieval painters of Tuscany, including Pietro Lorenzetti, Simone Martini, and Giotto.

The Italian painters, Bray asserts, gave him the courage to paint what he really wanted to paint, including the landscape. From his take on the contemporary art world, he had understood the landscape genre to be a “dinosaur.” At the same time, his teachers at the University of Southern Maine had encouraged him to dig deeper: while they had recognized a special genius in their prize student and his sublime geometric abstractions, they missed a sense of identity.

Did absence make the art grow stronger? Like Gott’s Island novelist Ruth Moore, who wrote her first two novels about the Maine coast while living in California, distance seemed to heighten Bray’s connection to a place an ocean away. While in

Italy he started to paint his hometown of Monson from memory, creating what he fondly refers to as a kind of “Maine gothic,” emulating the primitive, almost anonymous quality found in his favorite Italian painters. It was something of a game, to try to remember details: what his house, or the P.W. Knight and Sons dry goods and clothing store on Main Street, looked like.

At the same time, Bray discovered casein tempera, the favored medium of the Italian painters he so admired. He embraced the milk-protein-based paint with its distinctive characteristics: transparent and luminous, fast drying and water-resistant. Where casein tempera might have frustrated other painters because of the patience that using it required, it fit Bray’s obsessive nature and work ethic.



Cheese Factory Spring, 2007. Courtesy Caldbeck Gallery, Rockland.



Sew Gundy Falls, 2001. Courtesy Caldbeck Gallery, Rockland.

ALAN BRAY

Stateside again, settled in Sangerville, the painter set out to explore his passion for place, creating remarkable images that responded to his homeland. A 1980 painting of a slate quarry recalls the landscapes of Yves Tanguy, surreal and beautifully forsaken. *Fish House* from the same year displays his special sense of northern ways, the ice-fishing shacks scattered across a frozen lake.

Bray became expert at highlighting the eerie quality of his surroundings. Three trees wrapped in cloth in the 1986 painting *Standing Against Winter*, for example, evoke bound figures—prisoners to the change of seasons. He also turned out still lifes, meticulous constructs that often double as visual puzzles.

Over time this signature style and vision placed Bray's paintings on the short list of contemporary American landscape painters whose work is coveted by collectors. Schmidt-Bingham Gallery, a premier art space on 57th Street in New York City, took him on in the early 1990s and proceeded to sell just about everything he produced for the next decade. Bray showed across the country, while in his home state his work appeared in major shows, from the fortieth anniversary "On the Edge" exhibition at Maine Coast Artists (now

the Center for Maine Contemporary Art) to several Portland Museum of Art biennials (including the 2007 edition).

How does Bray select his subjects? On very rare occasions a scene will send him directly to his easel, but most of the time a painting requires a gestation period, which can be months or years in duration. Something will attract him—the configuration of softwoods among the conifers on Borestone Mountain, the phenomenon of ground fog, or a waterfall cascading between chiseled cliffs—the encounter triggering a conceptual process that may lead to a painting. On-site sketches in graphite or watercolor, plus photographs, capture the structure of a motif (Bray is not, as a *plein air* painter is, concerned with light or palette at this point).

Every painting is a commitment. “I’m going to be spending a month with a painting, sometimes longer,” Bray explains, “and so I generally don’t paint things in a spontaneous kind of way”—not that he could, considering the labor-intensive medium he has chosen. The rich and silky surface of one of his caseins is only achieved through the building up of many layers of paint, with missteps sanded out or wiped off with a wet rag as the painting progresses. Bray has likened the process to that of writing a poem.

Sites with a resonant history attract Bray, be it a manmade spring deep in the woods where the local cheese factory once cooled its cheese or a cove on Lake Hebron where dam-flooded tree trunks spread roots beneath the water’s surface. Some of his paintings forgo a specific place in favor of a pictorial con-



Fallen Nest, 2007.

cept. *Flood*, from 2006, one of several recent paintings that explore the play of reflections of trees in water, might be a Magritte for all its marvelous illusion. (Some disoriented viewers, Bray says, have suggested that the painting is upside-down).

Other images relate to natural events, such as *Wind Chill*, 2005, which renders the sweeping onslaught of icy gusts—reminiscent of the Wendigo of Canadian lore that freezes hapless travelers in their tracks. In *Hatch*, also painted in 2005, the rippling dimple of a hatching fly accents the surface of a pond, its random emergence conjoined to a zigzag pattern of dead trees in the water. This painting underscored Bray’s relationship to

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the world, which he scrutinizes as a shaman would, for signs.

Bray is also fascinated by the impact of man on the environment. His paintings frequently respond to this interaction, from the ghostly pattern of new timber growth on a hillside to what he refers to as “the geometry of agriculture”: farms with their divisions of fields and rows of plantings. To this painter, the remnants of a gristmill on nearby Black Stream are “like a temple.”

With dismay Bray recounts how landscape companies have been coming into the area to buy stone walls and transport them, stone by stone, to coastal estates. In the same breath, he remarks on the “vast generational divide” that exists vis-a-vis our relationship to nature. Back in the day, children came in contact with nature with their hands and feet, Bray notes, whereas today people experience the wonders of the natural world through television. It’s nature as “a kind of highlight reel,” he says: “the lion killing the antelope, the bird at the exact moment it gets the fish.” When they actually enter nature, the painter has

observed, these estranged people are bored and/or indifferent.

Bray’s territory extends into different corners of Piscataquis County, including remote Spencer Pond, 35 or so miles north of Greenville in the heart of the Maine Highlands region. For going on a quarter century, he and four friends, at times joined by a special guest or two, have spent a week on the pond “fishing, telling lies, playing cards,” and making art. The results of their outings were shown last year at the Turner Arts Center and this past fall in the Craig Gallery at Unity College.

Alan Bray is not the first painter to lay claim to Piscataquis County. Monson-born Seth Wyman Steward, Jr. (1844-1934) painted local scenes; his works are sought by collectors these days. Carl Sprinchorn (1887-1971), who moved from his native Sweden to New York City around the turn of the nineteenth century, came to Monson in 1911 in search of Swedish relatives and ended up painting remarkable images of interior Maine, including the logging camps.

In recent years a number of contem-

porary painters have been introduced to the area through the Maine Audubon Society’s Borestone Mountain preserve. Started by artist Lindsay Hancock two summers ago, the society’s program brings painters to lodges on Sunset Pond with the idea that each of them will contribute an artwork from the stay to its annual auction. Bray and Marguerite Robichaux co-hosted a similar gathering this past summer, introducing the likes of Phil Frey, Dennis Pinette, Rebecca Goodale, and Tom Hall to this special corner of Maine.

When Bray isn’t painting, there’s a good chance he is doing something for his community. He credits his father-in-law for setting an example. Don Hall served in the legislature and was committed to his community and neighbors. Bray has been active with many civic endeavors, from town planning boards to the Piscataquis County Committee of the Maine Community Foundation. He speaks with special pride of the restoration and revival of the East Sangerville Grange and the Center Theatre in Dover-Foxcroft as community centers.

His public service was recognized with the Jefferson Award for Enrichment in the Arts in 2003.

Bray can be found most days in his studio on the second floor of what was once his wife Diana's grandparents' home. On one wall of the neat and spare space is a blackboard where compositions are worked out: perspective, horizon, spatial foils. On the other side of the room is the latest in technology: an analog printer Bray acquired with an economic development grant aimed at helping artists and artisans improve or expand their business.

Over the years people have expressed a desire to own a painting by Bray, but couldn't afford one (prices these days run from \$4,500 to \$14,000). With the help of master photographer and printer Todd Watts, who lives in nearby Blanchard, Bray has begun making prints of a few of his paintings, which he sells on his web site, www.alanbray.com.

The first print is a reproduction of *Urban Nest* (2006), one of the marvelous renderings of bird nests that Bray has created over the years (this one appeared

in Greenhut Galleries' second show focused on images of Portland). It's a case of one designer admiring another's design: "I think that bird nests are the most beautiful objects on Earth," Bray says. Some years ago he lived for a week in a motel in Ithaca, New York, while he studied the collection of nests at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

The Brays' daughter, Abbey, a landscaper and English major at the University of Southern Maine, supplied the nest depicted in the print. Son Eric is a real estate broker in Florida. He and his wife recently adopted a little Chinese girl. Bray is looking forward to introducing her to Maine, to a stretch of out-of-town road that features, he points out proudly, five active farms that have been in the same families for three or four generations.

At the end of a glorious Friday in late August, after providing a tour of his studio and leading an outing to Borestone Mountain, Bray showed off his hometown of Monson. Dinner at Spring Creek BBQ was followed by a lively bluegrass session at the Monson General

Store. Stopping for a beer at Lakeshore House along the way, Bray was greeted by a tattooed fellow at the bar who asked, "Still painting?" Bray replied in the affirmative, a smile on his face—just a fellow resident of a small town in inland Maine making a living doing what he knows and loves best, one precise brushstroke at a time. ✨

Carl Little's books include Edward Hopper's New England and The Art of Maine in Winter. He is a Maine Boats, Homes & Harbors contributing editor.

For more information:

www.alanbray.com.

The Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland represents Alan Bray (12 Elm St., 207-594-5935; www.caldbeck.com). He also shows his work at the Thos. Moser company showroom in Freeport (149 Main St., 207-865-4519; www.thosmoser.com). A few of Bray's pieces are included in an exhibition curated by former CMCA curator Bruce Brown, on view at the June Fitzpatrick Gallery at MECA in Portland in February 2008. 522 Congress St., 207-772-1961; www.junefitzpatrickgallery.com.