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# Jeff Epstein's intimate paintings of the everyday

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By KEN GREENLEAF | October 30, 2013

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'The Space Between' 2011, oil on panel, 20 by 6.75 inches

Jeff Epstein's show is a group of small paintings in a small room at the end of a small alley in Portland, but it opens questions that are valuable and substantial. The largest of the dozen-plus paintings are only twenty by fifteen inches, and most are much smaller. An attentive viewer, nonetheless, will take away a generous awareness of Epstein's surroundings — how he sees things and what they mean to him.

This is, in today's art world, something of a rarity. Those who spend much time in galleries will be familiar with the current academic trends toward ostensibly transgressive social investigation or post-Warholian irony, which taken together result in what is beginning to be called Neo-Mannerism. Genuine sincerity is rare and undervalued, and using the quiet theater of everyday life as a subject and creating real poetic resonance is rarer still. Yet that is exactly what Epstein is up to with these little paintings.

Epstein divides his time between New York and Cushing, Maine. His work has been shown fairly often over the years at Caldbeck in Rockland and around the midcoast area, but this is the first chance for Portland viewers to get a close look at these personal and unassumingly intense works.

It is in the nature of much current art to demand a wall text for apprehending it, and indeed the art is often simply an illustration of a statement. It is also common to assume there is very little difference between a reproduced image and the work itself.

Epstein's paintings, and indeed most really good paintings, are just the other way around. Reproductions can't convey what they are about — one needs to go there and see them without the intervention of a text or jpeg. To do so is to be quietly drawn into the world around his house and garden, and to see the everyday objects in that life the way he sees

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Maurice Brazil Prendergast (1858-1924) has been something of a problematic figure for those of us who grew up in the long shadow of modernism.

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them. Through the magic of the painter's eye and technique, commonplace objects become very special, seen with affection and interest. The richness of a quiet life becomes tangible to whoever wants to stop and look.

Take, for instance, "Shepherd's Crook and Telephone Pole." The crook is not a true sheep-snagger, but is instead one of those supports for a bird feeder one finds in every hardware store: stick it in the ground, it loops over and you hang your feeder. The telephone pole, with its cables, splice boxes, guy wires and all, is as commonplace as a thing can be, so omnipresent as to be invisible. The crook protrudes through an orange shrub while the pole and wires just stand in the background. The black of the crook is set against the gray of the pole, framed at the top by the wires and a green background. All are rendered in Epstein's signature painterly method, loose brushwork with the finer details suggested, often with borders drawn by scraping the paint away to make a white line.

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