

DECOR MAINE

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ESSAY BY
SARAH BRAUNSTEIN



ALAN BRAY'S MANHANDLED MAINE

One day this fall, I asked painter Alan Bray to show me a few of the places that have inspired his paintings. The artist has made magic out of the man-handled landscape of Central Maine for some 45 years now, elevating places altered by dams, mills, quarries, logging, and farming into mysteriously beautiful testaments to nature's ability to recover and heal.

Now we are bouncing down a deeply pocked and rutted dirt road that threatens to tear the exhaust off Alan's Subaru wagon as he insists on showing me Little Wilson Falls, where local folks picnicked and swam in his youth. A hiker coming off the Appalachian Trail is surprised and none too pleased to see us go bucking by on the woods road at five miles an hour.

I have come to Alan Bray country in Piscataquis County because the artist's output is so meager, just eight to 10 paintings a year, that his distinctive Maine landscapes are difficult to see. Four small new paintings were exhibited this summer at Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland, and he had a solo show at Garvey|Simon in New York a year ago, but the last time I had a chance to see a body of his work was in the artist's 2012 retrospective at the University of Maine Museum of Art in Bangor.

Now I am seeing "Brays" everywhere. The stone foundation of Knowlton Mills stands like an ancient ruin in the forest; the bald Buddha head of Borestone Mountain juts up out of the woods beside the Zen mirror of Onawa Lake; there are cellar holes, wells, springs, quarries, dams, and bogs on back roads all the way from Sangerville, where Alan lives now, to Monson, where he was born 72 years ago.

In a few weeks, Alan is headed to Italy for the first time since he studied there in 1973, earning his master's degree at the Villa Schifanoia in Florence. That's where a Maine boy picked up the medieval technique of casein on panel that makes his Maine landscapes glow with a strange inner light. "The way I approach landscape is with intimacy and familiarity," Alan says. "I'm painting things that I've lived around all my life. Then something will happen, sometimes it's something atmospheric or something emotional, and it takes on a different kind of aura and asks to be painted. The painting tells me what it wants to be about."

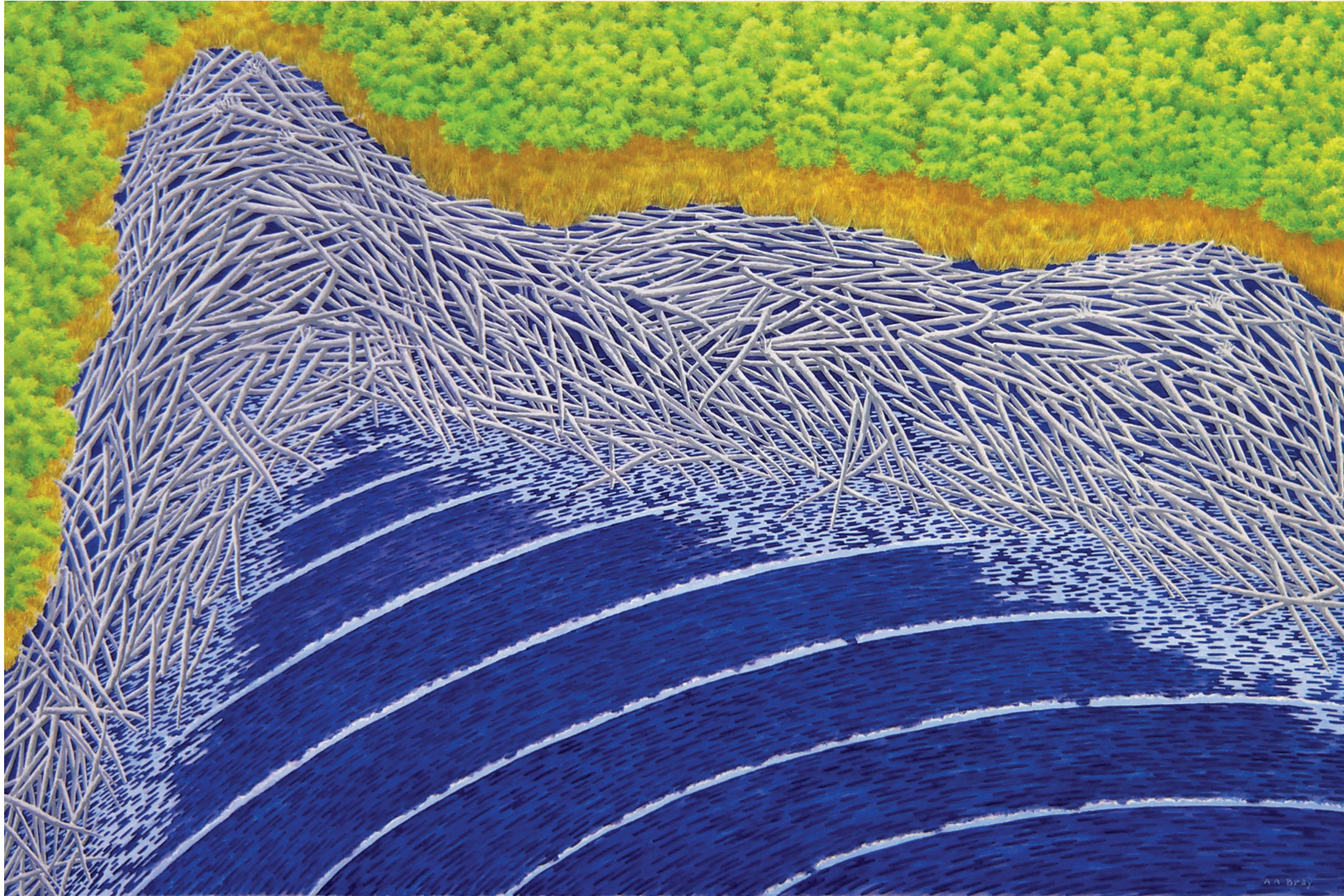
But there will probably be no Italian paintings from his return to Italy, just as there were no Newfoundland paintings from a trip he took there in July 1995. "I couldn't do anything with it," Alan confesses. "I think that was because I was looking at the landscape in a two-dimensional way. I didn't know what it looked like on the other side. I didn't understand the setting or its history. It was just a picture, a postcard."

"I paint the evidence of animals, the evidence of humans, but not the animals or humans themselves," the artist explains.

below The artist's vision of winter birch blushing through the snow was inspired as much by his reading as by his observation of nature.



ALAN BRAY | *Winter Birch*, 2018, casein on panel, 8.5" x 11"



ALAN BRAY | *Dri-Ki*, 2015, casein on panel, 20" x 30"

left Alan discovered the cove jammed with dead wood while examining Google Earth images.

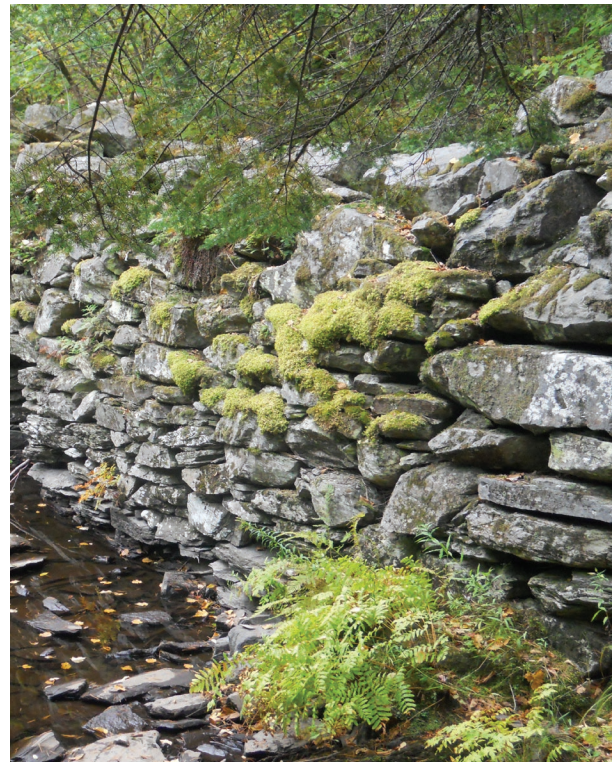
below His neighbor's pump house marooned in rotting snow creates a quintessential Bray moment.



ALAN BRAY | *Spring House*, 2018, casein on panel, 8.5" x 11"



ALAN BRAY | *Knowlton's Mills*, 1999, casein on panel, 36" x 24"



left Knowlton Mills was the original settlement in Sangerville, seen here as Alan painted it in 1999, and *below* as it looks today.

Most of what Alan Bray knows about the Central Maine landscape he knows from a lifetime of tramping around in it, but his Maine paintings have more remote origins—computer searches and books he reads. “Google Earth is my private plane,” he says.

“Flying” above the virtual landscape at the computer in his second-floor studio, the artist will find distinctive formations, such as a cove jammed with dry-ki, windblown dead trees drowned by damming. He then will travel to the site to make a painting such as *Downwind* (2015), an aerial view of the chevron of driftwood.

Or the artist will study the patterns of logging roads and then create bird’s-eye views of the Maine woods that make them look as though aliens had left cryptic signs on the landscape. “All of Northern Maine looks like that,” explains Alan. “It’s runes from here to the Canadian border.”

Last winter, Alan read a beautifully written little book about the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland five times. *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd inspired two of the small paintings at Caldbeck Gallery. “The writing is so vivid and so striking, I could just make a painting based on her description,” he says.

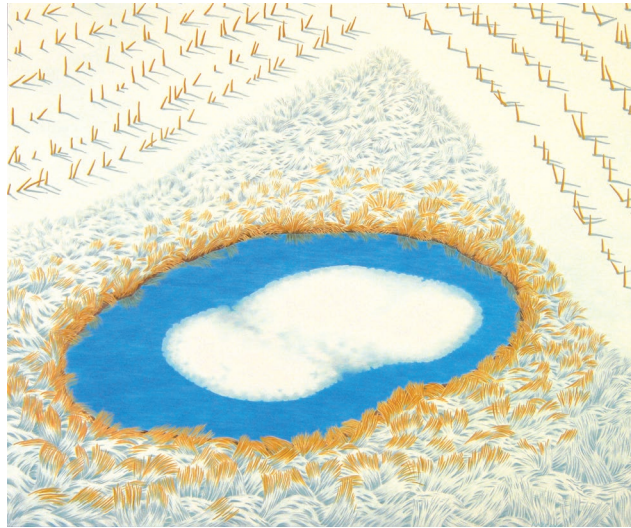
Winter Birch (For Nan Shepherd), a snowy hillside of birches blushing purple, was inspired by Shepherd’s description of birch trees, “when the sap is rising, a purple so glowing that I have caught sight of a birchwood on a hillside and for one incredulous moment thought the heather was in bloom.”

Living and Dying Simultaneously (For Bernd Heinrich), a wintry portrait of gnarled birch, was



ALAN BRAY | *Living and Dying Simultaneously (For Bernd Heinrich)*, 2018, casein on panel, 8.5" x 11"

above This painting of an ancient birch, one side dead, the other in leaf, was inspired by scientist Bernd Heinrich’s *The Trees in My Forest*.



ALAN BRAY | *Winter's False Start*, 2014, casein, 20" x 24"

above A first frosting of snow and a rime of ice elevate corn stubble and farm pond to transient beauty.

inspired by Alan's reading of Bernd Heinrich's *The Trees in My Forest*. "It has been dying all these years, and it may live, and die, for another fifty years before one May the last buds on the last living twig unfurl," writes the scientist of an ancient sugar maple.

The line reminded Alan, who is as influenced by what he reads as by what he sees, of an old birch in Monson, one side dead, the other in leaf.

Other than the lone hiker, we see no other people as we drive from place to remote place, getting out to gaze at rock and moss and water and trees. It has been decades since a human figure or even an animal appeared in one of Alan Bray's paintings, and I ask him why that is.

"I paint the evidence of animals, the evidence of humans, but not the animals or humans themselves," the artist explains.

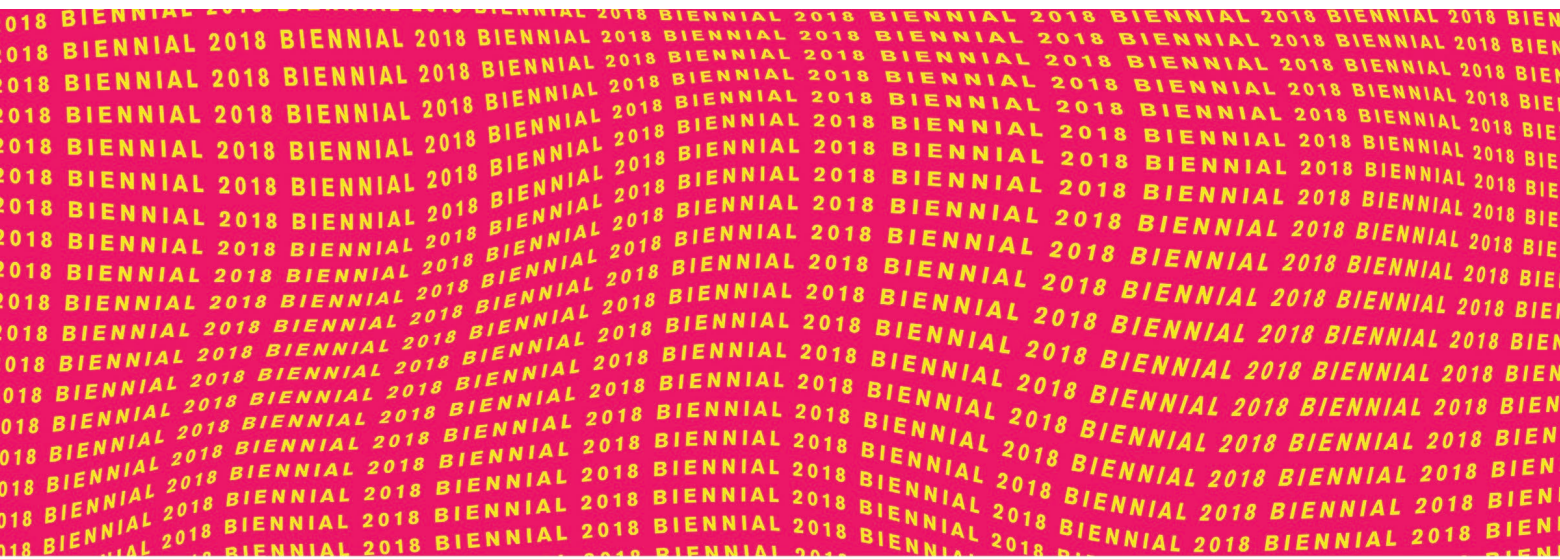
And it is this wild yet humanized quality that makes the Maine of Alan Bray so graceful and unique. ■



ELIZABETH MOSS GALLERIES



Marguerite Robichaux, *Nor'easter*, 72" x 96", oil on canvas



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