

Paintings emerge from storage to show Cushing cottage in early days as family getaway

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Nancy Wissemann-Widrig stands in the kitchen of her cottage in Cushing, where she and her husband have spent summers painting since 1968. She says the cottage hasn't changed much. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

The painter Nancy Wissemann-Widrig arrived at the little cottage on the banks of the Saint George River in Cushing for the first time in the summer of 1968, worried about the state of her country and the future of the world. Leaders and heroes were dying by assassins' bullets, and cities were burning.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Nancy Wissemann-Widrig, "A Place on the Water: Paintings from Maine, 1968-1975"

WHERE: Caldbeck Galleries, 12 Elm St., Rockland

WHEN: Through Sept. 26; noon to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday

INFORMATION: (207) 594-5935 or caldbeck.com

She came up from New York with her husband, John Wissemann, and their three young children and found respite in a rustic cottage, where the kids could roam while their painter-parents spent sun-filled days making art. “It seemed to us then that we were very far away from civilization. We only had a little radio to keep track of what was going on,” she said. “It felt very safe and comforting.”

Wissemann-Widrig and her husband, now 91 and 95, have been coming back ever since. They rented the cottage each summer before buying it in 1974. It has served as their part-time home since, a place for both of them to paint and a generational gathering spot for family. A few things have been updated – the plumbing, for one, and a painting studio – but the cottage feels much as it did in 1968 with its painted paneled walls, laden pantry shelves and, as the artist’s daughter writes, “the random flotsam of several generations of casual accumulation,” including an ever-present stuffed owl, who shows up in several paintings from the early years and remains in Wissemann-Widrig’s studio today.

More than a half-century since she first came here, in another summer of chaos in America with a pandemic raging as the country convulses with civil unrest, Wissemann-Widrig is grateful for the calm and consistency of her place on the water. This summer, Caldbeck Galleries in Rockland is showing a series of paintings that Wissemann-Widrig completed in the cabin during her early years, “A Place on the Water: Paintings From Maine, 1968-1975.”



“Summer in Maine,” 37 by 43 inches, acrylic on canvas, by Nancy Wissemann-Widrig *Jeff Fuller*,
Courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery

It’s an accidental exhibition. Melanie Essex, Wissemann-Widrig’s daughter who lives nearby in Cushing, was making an inventory of stored artwork at her parents’ year-round home in Southold, New York, on the eastern edge of Long Island. It was an arduous task, methodically going over each piece, taking measurement and photographs and making notes. Essex was assisted by her daughter. Coming across these acrylic and oil paintings felt like opening a family picture book from long-ago summer vacations, with images of kids playing on a backyard swing, kids curled up on sofas reading and nighttime card games at the table. There were paintings of fish, summer rain storms and full moons rising.

“It was like finding treasure right in front of your nose,” Essex said.

Some of the paintings she remembered, others she did not. Based on the labels on the back of the paintings, quite a number were shown in New York in the 1970s. They’ve never been shown in Maine.

Essex was 9 in the summer of 1968 when her mother began this series. While she doesn't remember all the paintings, she does remember her parents painting all the time. "That was the normal thing in our house. By '68, she had a big studio at one end of our house in Long Island. But in Maine, she painted wherever she found that was interesting. I was used to her easel set up in the living room or the kitchen or in my bedroom. It was part of life."

Wissemann-Widrig is a versatile painter, best known for her colorful, layered and perspective-shifting paintings of water and its movement. Lately, she has been making still-life paintings of folk-art objects, and portraits of other painters painting, a project she suspended this summer because, she said, "I don't want to paint them with masks on." She came to Maine in the 1960s as a more abstract painter, and shifted her style with her new landscape.



"Empty Places" by Nancy Wissemann-Widrig.
Courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery

Both the Portland Museum of Art and Farnsworth Art Museum own paintings by Wissemann-Widrig, who has been showing in New York since the 1950s and at Caldbeck since 1980s. She had her first show at Maine Coast Artists in Rockport, now the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland, in 1974.

Her connection to Maine came through a former roommate, Helen Friend of Skowhegan, whom Wissemann-Widrig met while both were doing graduate work at Ohio University. They moved to New York together and shared a loft, which they sublet from the painter Charlie DuBack, who also later settled in midcoast Maine. Among their mutual friends was the sculptor Bernard "Blackie" Langlais of Old Town, also then living in the same building in New York.

Langlais and Friend married and eventually made their life in Maine, settling in Cushing, where their homestead is now a preserve and sculpture park.

When Nancy contacted her friend Helen about coming up to Maine in the summer of 1968, Helen set her up with the Libby cottage down the road. "We rented it sight unseen," Wissemann-Widrig said. "When we came up, Mrs. Libby said, 'You might not want to stay. I think there is something wrong with the well.' But we did, and we liked it. That was three weeks. The next year it was six weeks, and then the whole summer."

Active painters, they immersed themselves in the Maine art scene just as they had in the art scene of eastern Long Island, the home of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning and other leading abstract expressionist painters. They were friends with the New York art dealer Betty Parsons, who invited them to parties with those and other artists. They had fun in both locations, and came to love the relaxed nature of Cushing. “The children were happy. They found playmates right here. We didn’t have to drive them to swimming lessons or tennis lessons, as we had at home. They were happy making their own fun, which is the way we grew up.”



“Card Players,” 30 by 42 inches, acrylic on canvas, by Nancy Wissemann-Widrig. *By Jeff Fuller, courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery*

The exuberance of the kids is reflected in the paintings by their mother. The paintings are full of energy and suggest movement – and exhaustion. The artist marvels at the memories, which are made fresh again looking at these paintings. “I try to remember how I ever managed to get those kids – I don’t think I ever got them to sit still,” she said. “I liked to keep them all close at hand. I never closed the studio door even after I had the studio. They were always welcome to come in and voice their complaints and sorrows and so forth. They were always in the middle of things, and I liked that. I liked the combination of being at work and being with my family.”

These paintings are personal, and she is glad to share them again. She is thrilled her daughter unearthed them. “It does bring back those years very clearly,” she said. “As my other son said, the same stuff is still around that is in the paintings. And of course we’re still here. It is sort of a time warp.”



“Maine Country Kitchen” by Nancy Wissemann-Widrig, acrylic on canvas, 1971. *By Jeff Fuller, courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery*

When the cottage came for sale in 1974, the kids insisted they buy it, she said. “They said, ‘We will go without everything if you buy the cottage.’ ”

If this were a normal summer, the cottage would be active with kids and grandkids. But no one is coming. In that sense, the quiet of 2020 reminds the artist of the comfort of 1968, when the chaos of the world felt a long way from the little cottage on the banks of the Saint George River.

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