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Differing styles, but painters together start a conversation about van Gogh

Michel Droge, Liz Hoag and John Knight on view at Elizabeth Moss Galleries in Falmouth.

BY DANIEL KANY

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"Dogleg Path at Gilsland," by John Knight, watercolor on paper, 11 by 14 inches. Photo by John Knight

The contrast between Michel Droge's and Liz Hoag's paintings now on view at Elizabeth Moss Galleries presents an unusually rich peek into the painting side of the artistic process. Depending on how you see Droge's paintings, you might be looking at the work of two landscape artists – or even three if you count John Knight, whose show in the gallery's back space also fits the landscape narrative.

Knight's newest works are small landscapes, nicely framed on paper. They are watercolor, but they evoke Vincent van Gogh. Though van Gogh is one of the most distinctive, recognizable artists in history, it's surprisingly hard to describe why his work is so powerful and stylistically recognizable. Knight's tip of the hat to van Gogh helps explain it. "Dogleg Path at Gilsland," for example, is an 11- by 14-inch watercolor in a typical van Gogh palette. The forms of the light green fields are defined by outlining strokes that sit over the lighter sections. An almost black pine, squat and stable, anchors the scene from the center – the composition swirls around it. This is where Knight takes a great lesson from van Gogh: No one has been better at using wet paint to combine lines into colored rhythms that pulse with color and energy. Knight's sky is simply a set of strokes defining the clouds, but then, instead of wash-brushing the sky, he makes it blue by pulling meandering lines away from the center-stage cumulus cloud. The cloud itself echoes the centering tree like a puffy white shadow, defined by the same blue in all its darker places.

ART REVIEW

WHAT: "Between Dreams" by Michel Droge, "Making Paths Through Gilsland Farm" by John Knight, "Everyday Maine" by Liz Hoag

WHERE: Elizabeth Moss Galleries, 251 Route 1, Falmouth

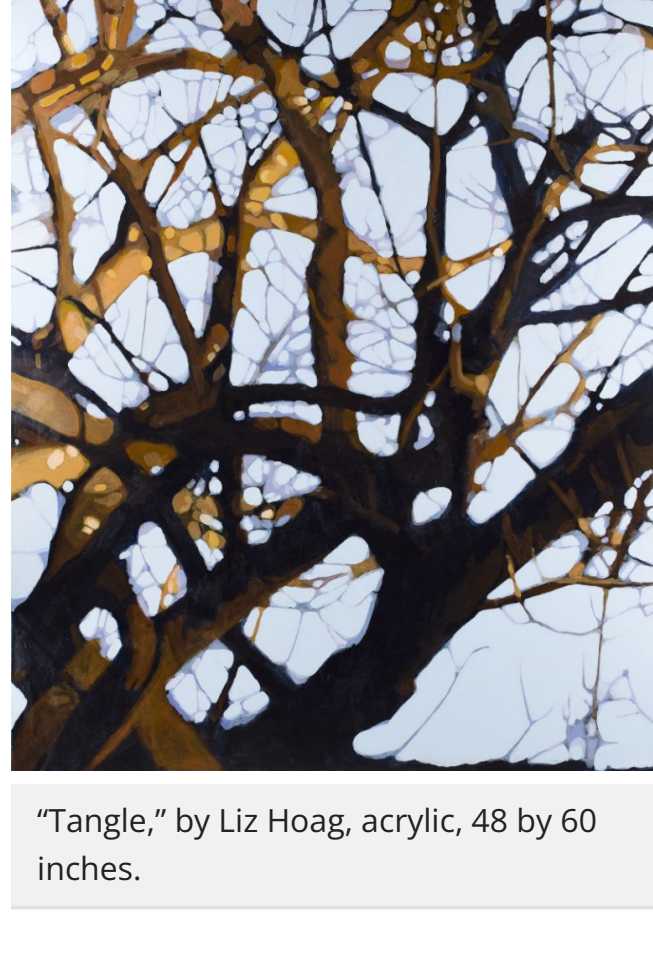
WHEN: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday, through Oct. 21

INFO: 781-2620, elizabethmoss galleries.com

We generally see echoes of van Gogh in rhythmically dashed, outline-drawn, boldly colored paintings, like Knight's. But we also see van Gogh's stylistic ripples in impasto-all-over paintings like those of the late Neil Welliver and, now, Liz Hoag.

Hoag's paintings in "Everyday Maine" are generally trees or landscapes that languish in the presence of brushy acrylic paint. In "Looking Back," for example, a stream meanders from a sunlit field into a canopy-shaded wood. The sun is hot white and bright outside of the wood, but it trickles in with the stream in the form of thick, sky-blue brushstrokes that play the part of dappled reflections. On the one hand, the high contrast hints of realism, but it also allows for the consideration of the strokes of paint laid out upon each other.

Hoag is doing this with acrylic, which dries so quickly that the strokes must be piled upon each other. Van Gogh was pushing wet paint aside with his loaded brush, an inexplicable skill better explained by sorcery than science. But technical magic aside, to us, the view is not so different.



"Tangle," by Liz Hoag, acrylic, 48 by 60 inches.

Hoag's most confident works, such as her 48- by 60-inch "Tangle," feature the negative space: Instead of painting a background and then putting a tree on top, Hoag has unapologetically finished with the spaces between the branches. The effect is that the entire surface of the painting leaps to the fore, not unlike stained glass. Moreover, the paintings that feature this effect quiver with visual rhythms that shift between literal paint and photorealistic effects. We see her process, her patience, her skill. This is the path less traveled, the long way around, and in my opinion, at least, the scenic route.

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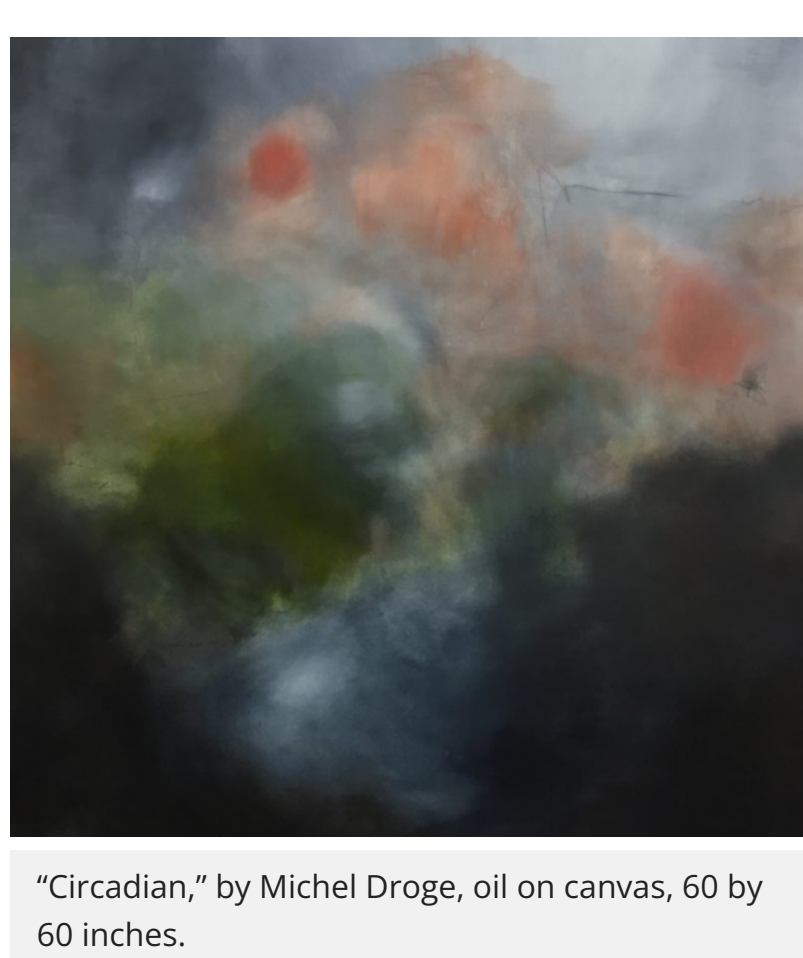
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Michel Droge's five paintings seem the most unlikely to relate to van Gogh; yet the comparison is apt and throws light on how van Gogh's contemporaries might have been seen his work. Droge's panels appear as abstract, thinly painted and highly glazed atmospheric nocturnes. But in their complexity and unusual balance of light, shadow and paint mark – set off by some unlikely pencil marks scrawled with the offhanded bravado of Cy Twombly – they convene a conversation with works such as van Gogh's seminal "Starry Night." Though "Starry Night" is structured like a landscape, it leaves behind the sleep-settled village at the base of the scene for the dreamy theatrics of the ethereal sky dancing above.



"Circadian," by Michel Droge, oil on canvas, 60 by 60 inches.

When I discussed Droge's paintings with a razor-sharp impromptu group of Maine College of Art students (where Droge teaches), they all saw Droge's atmospheric abstractions as landscapes. But when challenged on that point, they stepped away from the settled sense of place typical of landscapes to a visual orientation that moved up toward ethereal images. The paintings, they realized, were much more nuanced, complicated and unusual than simple landscapes. Droge's propensity for interrupting her images with drawn (even scribbled) graphite marks unbalanced their

basic reading of landscape.

While I initially read the works as images you might see when staring up at a night sky, I think the students had it right. A landscape, after all, is the viewer's visual experience of a scene in a place. And while Droge works hard to deny the physical grounding of the landscape – the foreground and fundamental premise of Hoag's and Knight's work – the point is the subjective visual experience of a person. A key difference between her work and traditional landscape is that Droge seems perfectly happy, even inspired, to leave her physical presence out of the view she presents. Landscapes generally try to give you a place to stand, and Droge works to keep that from happening.

Droge's "Circadian" is a 5-foot-square image punctuated by a cloud-filter red sun in the atmospheric upper stratus. It could be a view down from a mountain to water, like Chimney Pond from higher up on Katahdin. Her "Breathing Lesson" has a dark lower half with two orange spots in soaring light, cloudy white above: The work reminds me of "Starry Night," but without the need to fill in the village landscape below. Or, maybe, it could be the pair of nipples on a lover's breasts, but if you're seeing a landscape, it appears as lights in an atmosphere-filtered sky.

Droge's ability to push traditional techniques around tough questions of approach (and even theory), and yet insist on an aesthetic reading, is her great strength. Her work is subjective, complex and even difficult. But its beauty is difficult to deny. It thrives on its indeterminacy, which allows us to feed it with our own narratives, our own expectations, our own desires.

The trio of shows at Elizabeth Moss initially evades easy connection. But with a longer look, the topics shift away from the painterly approaches of the artists to the response of the viewers. And there, it all comes together.

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