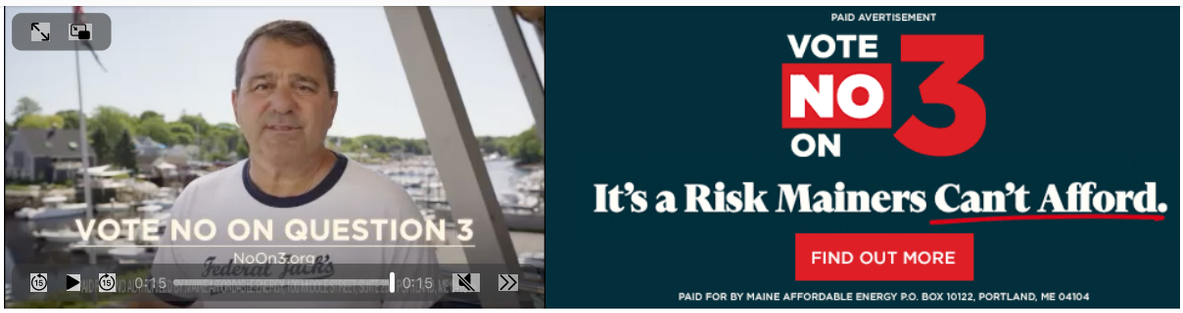

ARTS REVIEW > Posted October 15

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Art review: Find color on a foliage drive to Monson Arts or in town at Moss Galleries

'Northwoods: Absence and Presence features the paintings of Alan Bray and poems of Wesley McNair, while 'How Do I Look' takes on female body image.

BY JORGE S. ARANGO

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Alan Bray, "PW Knight & Son's," 1978 *Photos courtesy of the artist*

Leaf-peeping season is a perfect time to visit tiny Monson, a town that's has been on the art radar for some time (I'm egregiously late to it).

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Northwoods: Absence and Presence"
WHERE: Monson Arts, 8 Greenville Road, Monson
WHEN: Through Oct. 29
HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday and Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday, or by appointment
ADMISSION: Free
INFO: 207-997-2070, monsonarts.org

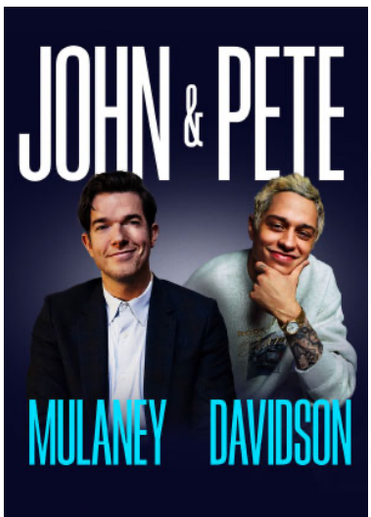
WHAT: "How Do I Look"
WHERE: Elizabeth Moss Galleries, 100 Fore St., Portland
WHEN: Through Nov. 24
HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday
ADMISSION: Free
INFO: 207-781-2620, elizabethmossgalleries.com

"Northwoods: Absence and Presence" (through Oct. 29) provides a kind of immersion in the delights of rural Maine, loosely pairing paintings of Alan Bray and poems of Wesley McNair.

If you stay in Portland, though, there's also color – and a lot to contemplate – at "How Do I Look," a show at Moss Galleries in-town location through Nov. 24.

COUNTRY PLEASURES

The sensibilities of artist Alan Bray and poet Wesley McNair share a deep appreciation for small-town country life. Bray is a Monson native and, over the years, developed an exacting style of painting that is nominally representational, but also fascinated with story – mainly concerning the odd



mysteriousness of nature and the temporariness of human presence on it. His style harks to both traditional landscape painting and the narrative style of America 18th-century itinerant muralists.

McNair is also a storyteller. Some of his poems refer to actual events and experiences, while others are simply fictional. Yet all pulsate evenly and comfortably with a simple, measured rhythm, occasionally – but only occasionally – intersecting with national and international headlines. In a lesser poet's hands, this could have been perilously nostalgic and saccharine. He has obvious affection for his surroundings and the people that populate them, but he sidesteps sentimentality with his matter-of-fact cadence and a cool observer's eye.

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The paintings are not really "paired" with specific poem wall texts that hover next to them. Too predictable. Instead, both poems and paintings speak for themselves and tangentially converse in witty digressions. For instance, "The Exit" is McNair's poem about encountering a multi-car pile-up attributed, by the traffic flagger, to "bad visibility" caused by the smoke that floated across the continent from California, Washington and Oregon wildfires in 2022.

Here, McNair's daily peregrinations are intruded upon by a disaster over 3,000 miles away. This in itself acknowledges the interconnectedness of all things, which we rarely consider in our daily lives or, certainly, in remote places like Monson. The painting next to the poem's wall text has nothing to do with this phenomenon. Instead, it's an image of a hole in the icy surface of a lake, perhaps made by ice fishermen (Bray's "Encroachment" of 1987).

Are there profound parallels here? Could "Encroachment" represent human effects on nature, a theme of McNair's poem? Well I suppose so. But the juxtaposition seems more a visual pun: the hole as a kind of exit – from terrestrial to underwater environments.

Bray paints what he knows well. "PW Knight and Son's" is a stylized representation of a nearby building now occupied by The Quarry restaurant. "Pearl and Clara" depicts two houses that still stand behind the gallery, visible through the office window at the rear (a stone's throw from Bray's own former home). In both cases, his technique is folksy, with collapsed, foreshortened perspectives that feel consciously naïve.

"PW" shows a portion of the building as general store, prior to its culinary incarnation. The plate glass window conflates images of mannequins behind it and exterior reflections of houses across the street and the mountains beyond them. To the left is the impossibly flattened perspective of the street into town and the river behind the house. There is no intention toward realism here. Instead, the style evokes New England itinerant mural painters like Rufus Porter.

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Alan Bray, “Solstice Snow,” 1998

But don’t let Bray’s quasi-naïve style fool you. It is intensely obsessive. There’s no way to comprehend the complexity of a painting like “Solstice Snow” (1998) without seeing it in person. Sit with it for a long while and you begin to realize the meticulous layering in the density of trees, more spaced in the foreground but becoming denser and denser as our eyes move toward background. The snow, too, is a miracle of technique. Bray didn’t merely resort to flecking the surface with paint using a flick of the wrist. Hundreds of flakes were clearly hand-applied.

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Alan Bray, “Straight Down Rain,” 2008

A work like “Straight Down Rain” feels initially graphic. But careful scrutiny reveals Bray’s understanding of how to depict the light, fluidity and surface tension of water. The ripples of each drop move concentrically outward, while the surface of the water also records the shade cast by trees around this lake or pond and the brighter light that funnels down onto the center of the open water.

Alan Bray, “Slate Quarry,” 1980

The still water in the painting “Slate Quarry” has an astonishing sense of depth, transparency and fluidity, while the landscape above it appears almost like the distant blue horizons of Renaissance portraits (i.e.: Hieronymous Bosch’s “Garden of Earthly Delights,” Da Vinci’s “Mona Lisa”).

On the wall next to this painting, McNair’s “Glass Night” poem – like the others, from his book “Late Wonders: New and Selected Poems” (Godine, 2022) – seems obliquely to describe the painting’s light: “Come, moon-coated/snow hills, and flung/far ahead pole/by pole the long/glass cobweb.”

WOMEN LOOKING

The dozen works in “How Do I Look,” curated by Moss Galleries director of sales Lauren Donovan, range from fierce and feral to eccentric and enchanted. The title refers at once to women’s bodies as the objects of societal (often male) gaze and assumptions, as well as women’s own contemplations of their body images. This is not a novel idea, of course. Barbara Kruger, Judy Chicago, Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith – the list of women grappling with these issues through their art is long and illustrious.

Giordanne Salley, “Transfiguration Self Portrait”

There is a lot to say on these subjects as well, which deserve a much larger survey of work than what is afforded by the modest size of Moss in Portland. There are very good paintings here, but because of the space limitations, there is also feeling that we are only skimming the surface, like a rock skipping across water. I left longing for more depth, though through no fault of Donovan and her selections.

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In the fierce camp? "When I look at my secret colors, I feel like bursting into tears," a painting by Christina Nicola that reminded me of Goya's black paintings at the Prado in Madrid, specifically "Saturn Devouring His Sons." The figure at left in her painting here looks almost identical to that work, which Goya created while suffering, it has been hypothesized, from Susac's Syndrome, which causes hallucinations, paralysis and hearing loss.

Nicola's horror is another matter. If the title is indicative of intent, this queer Black artist – who describes her work as "afromantic" – seems to be mounting a full-bore assault on the color pink. It's a color ascribed, of course, to girls (as blue is for boys). But the associations of feminine delicacy and softness it carries is literally being ripped to shreds, as are people's expectations of Nicola as a female.

Annika Early's gouaches on paper puncture the images presented in the media of women. There's considerable humor here, though Early deploys a very sharp skewer. I can't print the titles she re-envisions for Martha Stewart Living or Sports Illustrated's oft-criticized "swimsuit issue," but she basically replaces the cover model with a witchy she-demon and cleverly rewrites the cover lines ("Pretty & Practical Hole Ideas," which I'll leave to your imagination). A third piece illustrates a woman's hirsute legs and privates revealed from under her hoisted petticoats as she urinates onto a cake stand. Pure and soft? I don't think so.

Darien Bird, “Ghostriders”

Darien Bird takes an entirely different tack. Her women appear as otherworldly beings. Even in their most human incarnations, there’s something about their eyes and their unflinching stare that makes them feel unsettlingly supernatural. This, I suspect, is intentional. Bird has spoken of the dehumanizing experience of cultural misogyny. Rather than deny women’s humanity, “Ghostriders” elevates them as superior to it.

The figures here are undeniably alluring – round-breasted, curvaceous – but their eyes are empty cavities emitting white light, and their smiles calmly cut right through you. They glow in a double aura as luna moths fly around them (associated with the goddess of the moon in Roman mythology, these moths are symbols of feminine energy).

Tessa O’Brien, “On the Ball”

Tessa O’Brien’s “On the Ball” considers the self-obsession with body image of our age, but on women’s bodies in particular. O’Brien sprawls naked on an exercise ball atop a mat, dumbbells nearby, as she takes a picture of herself on her cellphone. The whole image is captured, possibly, by a mirror. This work, more than any other, seems to be literally posing the question of the title.

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