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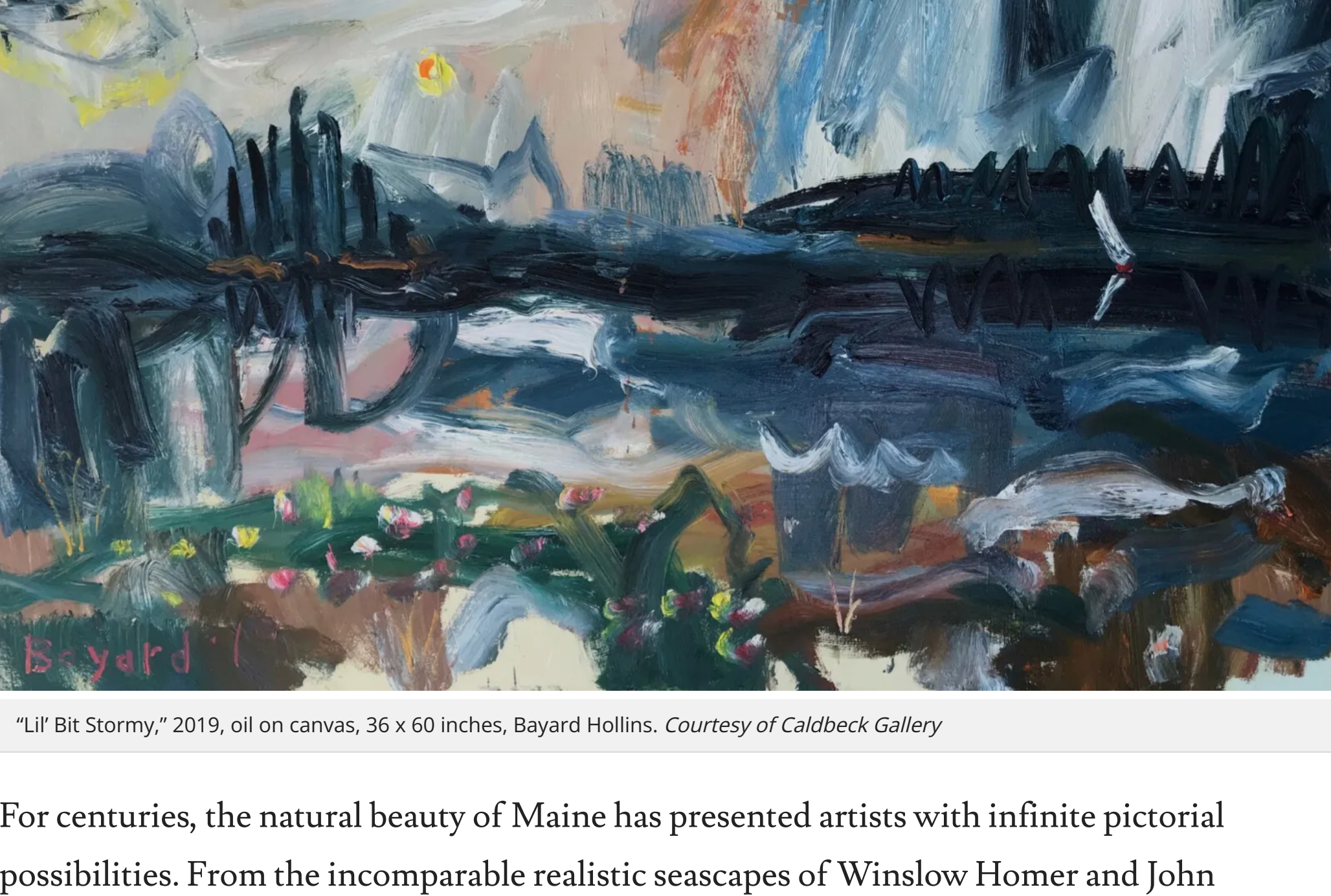
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Art review: Caldbeck holiday show conveys sense of this place

The Autumn Group Show runs through Jan. 16 in Rockland.

Posted December 20, 2020Jorge S. Arango

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"Lil' Bit Stormy," 2019, oil on canvas, 36 x 60 inches, Bayard Hollins. Courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery

For centuries, the natural beauty of Maine has presented artists with infinite pictorial possibilities. From the incomparable realistic seascapes of Winslow Homer and John Marin's more impressionistic expressions of the coast to the pine tree stands of David Driscoll and the color-splashed forests of Monhegan Island artist Lynn Drexler, it has provided an inexhaustible source of inspiration. The current holiday show at Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland gets at the heart of this essential Maine spirit like few other holiday surveys around the state do.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Autumn Group Show

WHERE: Caldbeck Gallery, 12 Elm St., Rockland

WHEN: Through Jan. 16

HOURS: Noon to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Friday, Saturday by chance or appointment

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-594-5935, caldbeck.com

What is so wonderful about the Autumn Group Show, which runs through Jan. 16, is its complete lack of pretense. There is nothing about the works here that we can call conceptual or intellectual. For the most part, they cleave to the particular essence of this locale, its unique topography, light and sensibility. They place us unequivocally in each setting with an immediacy that captures the specific magic of a transient moment within it.

For me, the standouts of the exhibition are those that are less literal and convey a more intangible, evanescent sense of place. The artists in this grouping who do that best are those who explore that shifting, nonspecific space between

representation and abstraction.

Bayard Hollins's "Lil' Bit Stormy" is a prime example. Even if the title were not written on the canvas itself, we would know what we were looking at. The scene is familiar, as is the weird light that precedes the deluge. Like other artists, Hollins works with oil paint. But the base is actually walnut oil, which dries in a way that appears as if it is still wet, enhancing the drenching anticipation of the stormy scene. It also emphasizes the voluptuousness of the medium, as well as the elementally gestural quality of Hollins's signature thick brushstrokes.

Lois Dodd's "Untitled (Path through the Woods)" is very clearly what it says it is. Its underlying geometric structure conveys the tree canopy and the path, but does so with the reductive reverence that inspires its cathedral-like sanctity, much in the way that Georgia O'Keeffe's painting of the Brooklyn Bridge did. It is also quietly astonishing – as nature can be quietly astonishing – that Dodd's minimal palette of green, yellow, gray and brown can capture such a sense of light and shadow. In this case, less is definitely more.



"The Consort," c. 1998, mixed medium on paper, 18 x 24 inches, William Thon. Courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery

This is also the case with William Thon's "The Consort," but in a most eloquent and poignant way. Thon's black-and-white watercolor image came of necessity. Knowing that it was painted toward the end of his life, when Thon's macular degeneration had robbed him almost completely of sight and destroyed his ability to see color, what he pulled off with this work – the subtle modulation of tone, the suggestion of subject matter with minimal gesture – is nothing short of miraculous. It depicts a fishing boat thronged by a thick cloud of gulls, each no more than a pair of arched lines. We get the movement, the frantic grab for food, the sheer density of birds. Yet there is not a single articulated feather, beak or eye. There is no fisherman and barely an outline of a boat, yet it's enough to palpably sense the vessel's weight and volume.

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"Pier and Tree," 2017-2018, acrylic and oil on canvas, 12 x 12 inches, Kayla Mohammadi. Courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery

Kayla Mohammadi's works first seduce you with color in the way that British artist Howard Hodgkin's paintings do. But they are nearer and more structured, and the individuality of each form within the frame, as well as Mohammadi's play of patterns, can suggest fabric or paper collage. One might never discern a pier and tree unless the title "Pier and Tree" did not tell us that this is what we're looking at.



"Cormorant Drying Wings," 2020, driftwood, 21 1/2 x 38 x 2 inches, Dan West. Courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery

Though there are other lovely painted works by Melanie Essex, Nancy Glassman, Frederic Kellogg and Nancy Wiseman-Widrig, it's not all about painting. Dan West's "Cormorant Drying Wings" is the sculptural equivalent of the unaffected "less is more" ethos. Physically speaking, there's precious little here: planks of saltwater-weathered wood that define the bird's wings and tail, and a branch-like form that suggests the neck, head and beak. It's sparseness says everything we need to know and elicits the sense of this avian creature with a beguiling charm we cannot resist.

There is also photography. Patrisha McLean contributes three of her child portraits – preadolescent girls bedecked in flowers who convey innocence as well as a wisdom beyond their years. Massachusetts photographer John Goodman uncovered color slides from the '70s and '80s that he'd neglected to develop, and has recently started producing nostalgic images from his coming-of-age as an artist. Even though "Seaview Motel (Woman/Phone Booth/Truro)" is not an image specific to Maine, what it transmits about the spirit of New England summers is as true of the seasonal experience of Ogunquit or York as it is of Cape Cod.

There's a lot more here – smaller works crowding the gallery windows, mantelpiece and other surfaces – all of it capturing some aspect of the lakes, beaches and woods of our region.

While in town, by the way, it is also worth stopping into Dowling Walsh's Holiday Salon. It is a freer-ranging smorgasbord compared to Caldbeck's very focused perspective. The latter's approach feels cohesive and, so, telegraphs a much more evocative sense of place. Yet within Dowling Walsh's "greatest hits"-style all-overness, there are wonderful works by Connie Hayes, Tessa Greene O'Brien, Margaret Rizzio, Tollef Runquist, Greta Van Kampen, John Koenig and others.

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