

Review

Life & Culture

Arts & Entertainment

Summer's end is the perfect time for sumptuous exhibits in Rockland, Portland

Dowling Walsh and Caldbeck galleries in Rockland, and Cove Street Arts in Portland play host to shows that wrap up the season.

Material Concerns

Speaking of materiality, three shows of the five currently at Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland — “Dan Dowd: What’s Going On?,” “John Walker” and “Melanie Essex: Heavy Weather” (extended with special Mon/Tues opening through Sept. 2) — also deal with the way materiality can embody and enhance content.

Dowd, who works with discarded materials such as clothing and tires, has made a huge conceptual and compositional leap with this body of work. They still comment on our hyper-consumerist, wasteful culture with their signature mix of skirt

ruffle-style tire rubber and shapes wrapped in various fabric. But there is, first of all, a confidence in his mixing that feels more intentional and realized than just being random, cleverly witty or merely decorative. The combinations of textures and materials is also more interesting, especially those that incorporate remnants of fur coats.

The underlying intention, according to his statement, is that these works represent “an homage to the original craftsman, and to the environment which [sic] provided the raw substance of these objects.” Which is why, one assumes, that many of these garments are layered to expose their reverse sides. Seams and pockets become

visible, illustrating the craft and complexity of their making. This alone adds another dimension that deepens meaning and, at times, even poignancy. We appreciate them for the functions they served (keeping us warm and dry, conveying our cars from our house to work or to grandma's or to new places of discovery).

Their application can also evoke other things. The back side of a fur coat in "Lee Island Cow" is both humorous and creepy for the way it suggested the animal's belly, but also its flaying and its use in service of human comfort and aesthetics.





John Walker gives us a few of his bingo card works, as well as paintings on canvas. But, again, something has changed. For years he has been painting the tidal mud flats he can see from his studio. The shapes of pools and the ridges formed in sand by the receding waters are all still here. But two things have changed.

Walker has stated how he could not paint the beauty of the seaside — blue water and sky, sun, crashing waves. He preferred instead to turn his attention to the browns, grays, blacks and murky greens that dominate at low tide. Suddenly, however, these works are alive with color, as if the light in them has changed and the landscape has woken up and come to life.

The other difference is the thickness of his paint application. He has never been stingy with his pigments, but the way he has built up the surfaces with scabrous impasto and great globules of paint creates a kind of corporeal geology that parallels and even, at times, surpasses the geological composition of his subject matter. These works are a celebration of the sheer materiality of paint and feel so gloriously decadent you'll want to touch them.

Melanie Essex's new paintings have strayed attractively from representation. We can still discern the view she enjoys from her property of the St. George River, but in various paintings it almost disappears into a

the St. George River, but in various paintings it almost disappears into a swirl of abstract color.

There is also a more concerted focus on the sky as a harbinger of weather and light phenomena. Still largely monochromatic — each painting is a tonal symphony of one or two colors — the horizon line is much lower, so that sky occupies most of the surfaces. Essex depicts the materiality of the weather, which can be tumultuous and thick with portent, (“Red Tide Receding,” “A Moment”), bright and beautiful (“A Good Day”), caught in the gloaming (“Transition”), alive with mysterious forms (“Greenland,” “Ruckus,” “Satisfaction”).



These forms can at times imply cloud shapes with a simple line, while simultaneously touching upon something less definable. In “Om,” for instance, is the blue outline simply indicating cloud shape, or is it commenting on the insubstantiality of the cloud’s misty matter? A cloud, after all, unless it is densely cumulus, is basically vaporous and phantom-like. How to convey the fleeting materiality of something so temporary? Could this line simply be framing the transience of its nature — barely here in this moment and gone the next?

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