

## ART REVIEW

## Bates pairs Hartley drawings, works by contemporary artists

The exhibit has been long in the making and is well worth a visit to the Lewiston college museum.

By JORGE S. ARANGO

**D**on't let the cumbersome title put you off. Plainly speaking, the current exhibition at Bates College Museum of Art is one of the most interesting art experiences you'll have this winter.

"And So Did Pleasure Take the Hand of Sorrow and They Wandered Through the Land of Joy" (through March 18) – now breathe – capitalizes on the museum's extensive Marsden Hartley holdings, the largest of any institution (almost 200 drawings, many paintings, personal effects and studio tools).

Museum director Dan Mills, who was at the museum when I dropped in, calls the show "a slow-burn curatorial idea" that smoldered for years. That idea – to juxtapose Hartley drawings with works by contemporary artists that relate to, or were directly inspired by, Hartley – finally caught fire. We should be grateful.

For "And So Did," Mills approached seven painters and one photographer – visiting their studios, inviting them to view archives or simply choosing works he recalled from other shows – then paired them with drawings from the Hartley sketchbooks. Maine painter Katherine Bradford visited the archives to comb the Hartley portfolio herself, finally landing on one of the last drawings she came across.

That pairing compares Hartley's "[Study for Fisherman's Family]" against Bradford's own "Standing Figures in Summer" (as well as a second painting by her). The affinities are remarkable, like a wild yet impossible "separated at birth" reunion. In both, the figures mostly stand with arms hanging down at their sides. They are blocky and awkward, tenderly vulnerable and, as blank as their expressions are (or literally blank in Bradford's faceless subjects), still convey connection.

Artists wrote their own wall labels except for John O'Reilly, who is deceased. Of "[Fisherman's Family]" Bradford writes: "There is a plain-spoken and forthright manner to his figures, who are without affect yet appear to be connected to each other and to humanity." Absolutely.

The show plays off various bodies of Hartley's oeuvre – landscape, portraiture, the homoerotic gaze and religious themes. Most directly connected to the show's germination was Massachusetts photographer O'Reilly, who was tremendously inspired by Hartley's art and tragic life (he died poor



Image courtesy of Bates Museum of Art, gift of Jack Balas and Wes Hempel

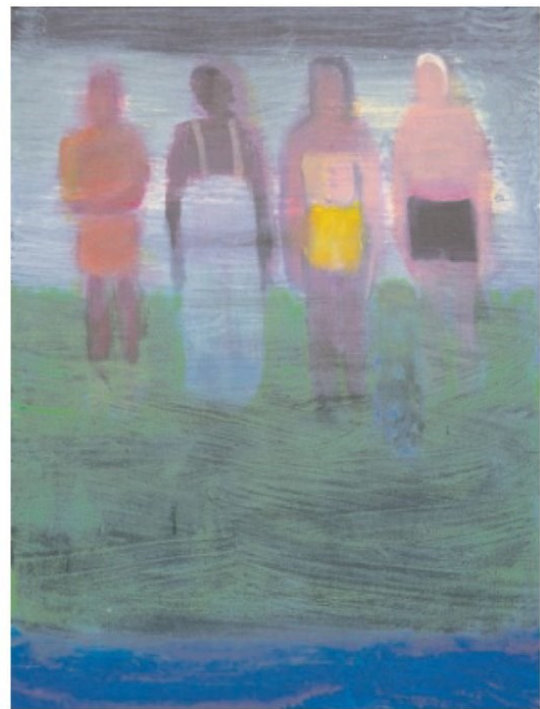


Image courtesy of the artist and Canada Gallery, New York

Above: Katherine Bradford, "Standing Figures in Summer," 2022, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 inches

Left: Jack Balas, "YOUNG BLADES ATOP MT. MARSDEN (For Marsden Hartley) (#1459)," 2017, watercolor, ink, and acrylic on paper, 45 x 30 inches



Image courtesy Bates Museum of Art, Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection, gift of Norma Berger

From left: Marsden Hartley, "[Forest Glade]," ca. 1935-36, black ink on white paper, 9 7/8 x 6 7/8 inches; Marsden Hartley, "[Standing Male Figure, No. 1]," ca. 1938-41, graphite and black ink on paper, 9 3/8 x 4 inches; Marsden Hartley, "[Study for Fisherman's Family]," ca. 1936-43, pencil on white on paper, 10 x 8 inches

and closeted). O'Reilly's rather bleak homage was his Dogtown series of photo montages, assembled from images of rock formations in Dogtown, an abandoned community near Gloucester, Massachusetts, where Hartley had painted in the early 1930s.

Both of O'Reilly's works feature these geological formations, combined with pictures of naked or half-naked men, one showing two shirtless male figures alone together on a sheltered beach. There are also insertions of what appear like remnants of

sculptures – a leg or a back – and what could be shots of a bedroom.

Were we not familiar with Hartley's sexual predilections or the homoeroticism of O'Reilly's own work, we might miss that particular connection. Even so, in the pairing of O'Reilly's montages with Hartley's "[Dogtown study: Winding Road and Blueberry Bushes]" we see that the rock formations in all of them (as well, of course, as the location) have everything in common.

Two other artists – Denver-based Jack Balas and

New York-based Mark Milroy – also refer to Hartley's sexuality, except this time through figuration and portraiture. Balas presents two tributes to Hartley that converse with Hartley's drawing "[Standing Male Figure, No. 1]," of which Balas, himself a gay artist, writes: "It's easy to see why I might respond to a drawing of a big beefy guy by Marsden Hartley when looking at my own paintings in the exhibition: big and beefy guys get my attention!" Balas's "Young Blades Atop Mt. Marsden (For Marsden Hartley)

(#1459)" is the more literal of the two, presenting four young, muscular men, one of them standing atop a grisaille rendering of Hartley as a kind of Mount Rushmore sculpture. The term "young blades," happened to be Hartley's code word for youths to whom he was attracted.

Balas's graphic, poster-like works brought to mind Tom of Finland, who created eroticized drawings of exaggeratedly burly, well-endowed men for the gay club scene in the 1970s through '90s. Despite his cult-figure status, I've never

liked Tom of Finland's leave-nothing-to-the-imagination work. Which makes me appreciate Balas's old-fashioned style renderings all the more. Aesthetically, they would have been at home in Hartley's day, the physiques more classically proportioned rather than uber-sexualized. They feel vulnerable (rather than just sex objects) and altogether sincere and affecting.

Mark Milroy's two male portraits display the same frank, head-on gaze of



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Hartley's drawing "[Seated Man in Plain Jacket]," an enigmatic expression that also gave power to the portraiture of David Hockney. Hartley strived, writes Milroy "to grasp the intangible in search of what is authentic." The viewer can feel that intangible interiority here.

By filling out the backgrounds with colors, houseplants and furniture, Milroy presents his subjects with a more domestic affect. His painting style is tactile in a way that also recalls Hartley's, with undiluted pigments applied thickly to the canvas. They're beautiful and compelling. A third Milroy painting, "Pinafore I," seems like the odd man out in the exhibition. It's a wonderful work, but other than the shallow depth of field, doesn't feel particularly appropriate to Hartley or the drawing with which Mills has paired it.

Hartley landscapes are juxtaposed with the work of three artists: Lois Dodd (Maine/New York), Jennifer Coates (Pennsylvania/New York) and Eric Aho (Vermont). Dodd appreciates how Hartley's drawing of Mount Katahdin and other landscapes get at Maine's essence – something, she writes, painters can only appreciate if they go away and return with fresh eyes. Certainly, her various, mostly quarry paintings, also unearth the essence of the Maine landscape. But, stylistically, her "Broad Cove on a Cloudy Day" feels most synchronous with Hartley in terms of its brushwork. Yet all relate to the desire in Hartley landscapes to hone in on something more spiritual about nature, a truth he absorbed from the writings of Transcendentalists like Thoreau and Emerson.

At first, Coates seems the biggest stretch. There's little stylistic similarity between she and Hartley. Yet, the more we look, the more we perceive in both artists that desire to capture the underlying spirituality of nature. Their works telegraph a thrum and pulsation of teeming life. Literal synergies exist, particularly in columnar plant forms. But Coates describes deeper impulses when she writes about Hartley's ability to pick up "the animist qualities of scrubland" and his "sense of devotional mysticism."

## IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** "And So Did Pleasure Take the Hand of Sorrow and They Wandered Through the Land of Joy," works by Eric Aho, Jack Balas, Katherine Bradford, Jennifer Coates, Lois Dodd, Mark Milroy, John O'Reilly and Dan Schein, and drawings by Marsden Hartley

**WHERE:** Bates College Museum of Art, Olin Arts Center, 75 Russell St., Lewiston; 207-786-6158, [bates.edu/museum](http://bates.edu/museum)

**WHEN:** Through March 18

**HOURS:** 10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Monday and Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday through Saturday

**ADMISSION:** Free

Aho's enormous painting "Source" is the most spectacular work in the show. It is ideally paired with Hartley's smaller "[Forest Glade]." Compositionally they have much in common: namely, a central area framed by trees. In Hartley's drawing, the trees bracket more distant trees, in Aho's painting a lake or waterfall. The latter indeed feels like some kind of source, though whether it's simply a source of water or of the sort of primeval presence pointed out in Coates's pieces is not clear. Aho writes: "... the self and nature are fused together by looking and feeling closely, and rise to the surface through the action of painting."

What rises to this surface is a showstopper of that fusion, achieved through semi-abstract, virtuosic brushwork and profound color harmonies. Additionally, two smaller works feel more quietly intimate in the manner of "[Forest Glade]."

Finally, there are Dan Schein's paintings of Christ, one crucified and one praying in the foreground while female figures in the background raise their hands in "Praise," the name of the painting. In his wall label, Schein admires Hartley's simplicity and the "sheer inventiveness and sincerity" of his work. What's interesting about these two paintings and their pairing, Hartley's "Monstrous Betrayal," is that simplicity is the last thing that comes to mind.

"Betrayal" is a masterfully complex drawing. There's so much going on:

Christ as scarecrow, with arms hooked over the cross's horizontal beam; a snake hissing out from the base; Christ's hands holding a bound bundle of fish and, perhaps, a loaf of bread (in keeping with the parable of the loaves and the fishes); a bird on one elbow; and all manner of flying creatures – a bat, cherubim, butterflies – fluttering around it.

The inventiveness and sincerity, however, are obvious. Hartley was not overtly religious, and this figure seems to mix multiple passions (ecstatic, painful, gluttonous, sinful, perhaps even occult) in the same manner as his 1940 "Christ Held by Half-Naked Men," where the Savior is supported by eight big beefy shirtless guys in blue jeans. It's impossible to imagine this painting didn't cause a scandal in its time; it would surely be branded blasphemous by today's religious right.

Hartley's approach to religious imagery makes Schein's works almost look conventional. Don't get me wrong: "Praise" is a luscious, rich and touching painting, and it exhibits the thick raw pigment application reminiscent of Hartley. Schein's crucifixion is also almost grotesque in the manner of Hartley's "Monstrous Betrayal," and all three works are tumid with emotion, walking a tight rope between agony and ecstasy. This gave me a new appreciation of the debt Hartley (as well as Schein) owes to the whole tradition of religious painting – from the Middle Ages through Baroque – when it comes to conveying spiritual experience.

One other note: Kudos to Mills for not overcrowding the gallery. The last show I attended at Bates was so crammed with objects, words and two-dimensional works that it made me dizzy. This thoughtful, well-spaced installation allows us to immerse ourselves in each fascinating juxtaposition in ways that make all the works more meaningful.

Oh, and that title. It comes from a line in a Hartley poem that does bring many of the show's themes together. But I would say that it's not going to draw people into the museum and, indeed, may turn off a good many. That would be a pity.

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