

A CONTEMPORARY TAKE

HARTLEY'S CENTURY OF MODERNIST INFLUENCE AT BATES

Only 45 minutes beyond Portland, in Lewiston, Maine, a winter trekker will revel in two exhibitions at the Bates College Art Museum unique to its own holdings, on view through March 18. On the main floor, in conversation with Bates's renowned Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection, Museum Director Dan Mills has brought together eight contemporary artists whose works illuminate the wide-ranging sensibility of this Modernist giant who styled himself the "Painter of Maine." The lower gallery showcases the cream of a collection of contemporary photographic prints recently donated to Bates College by the well-known Maine photographer and philanthropist, Barbara Morris Goodbody.

"And So Did Pleasure..." follows as an inspired second act to last year's major Hartley exhibition at Bates. Each artist has selected one of Hartley's drawings from the collection that speaks to their work and offers reflections on perceived connections between Hartley's artistic persona and their own. (The show's title quotes Hartley's own words from "The Royal Love Child," an allegorical lament revealing the anguish and joy of a closeted homosexual — in this century less problematic for a modern, more accepting audience.)

Hartley, born in Lewiston in 1877, was a pioneer who, over his lifetime, fused his expressionistic power and visionary abstraction into a singularly American approach to landscape, portraiture and still-life. Restricted under prevailing social convention, he migrated to other cities and continents in search of greater freedom. He returned to Maine in 1937 and readopted it as his home state.

The assembled artists align along several dimensions with Hartley and each other. Some depending on observation, others on memory and imagination, they prefer landscape and the human form. Their traditional media encompass oil paint, acrylic, watercolor, ink and colored pencil — the recently deceased John O'Reilly's collaged photos being the exception. Many have strong ties to the region or respond to its subject matter. Yet in their diverse processes, styles and artistic inclinations they incorporate a century of Modernist influence that expands the space for personal invention.

The large watercolors of Jack Balas channel the courage and strength of Hartley's drawings of sailors' and bathers' hypermasculine physiques. His ironic "YOUNG BLADES ATOP MT. MARSDEN (For Marsden



FEATURED MUSEUM

AND SO DID PLEASURE TAKE
THE HAND OF SORROW AND
THEY WANDERED THROUGH
THE LAND OF JOY

EXPRESSIONS OF
COMPASSION: SELECTIONS
FROM THE BARBARA
MORRIS GOODBODY
PHOTOGRAPHY
COLLECTION

BATES COLLEGE MUSEUM
OF ART

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LEWISTON, MAINE

THROUGH MARCH 18

TOP: Marsden Hartley, *Study for Fisherman's Family*, ca. 1936-43, pencil on white on paper, 10" x 8". Bates Museum of Art, Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection, gift of Norma Berger.

BOTTOM: Katherine Bradford, *Standing Figures in Summer*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 40" x 30". Courtesy of the artist and Canada Gallery, New York.

Hartley)" employs a cocky, gestural realism, silhouetting a band of bare-chested young men against an immense cumulus cloud bearing what may be the artist's own profile. The largest figure, heroically scanning the horizon, bestrides an ink wash of Hartley's pensive brow as if summing Maine's legendary Katahdin, while brandishing a banner-cum-javelin that proclaims his debt to the master.

Katherine Bradford's "Standing Figures in Summer," a tall, spare acrylic painting, rebukes or perhaps deflates Hartley's foursquare pencil "Study of a Fisherman's Family," comprised of five rigid, heavily-outlined figures overlapping in a compressed Cubist space. Bradford, subject of an exhibition last summer at the Portland Museum of Art, is famed for her soft-edged expanses of colored light, populated with flat, almost featureless, vaguely defined bodies whose sexuality seems hidden even from themselves. Her four flickering bathers swiped by shimmering white-blue waters sway without touching, backlit in a nearly horizonless, banded space. In their transparency they seem both far away and intimate. Deliberately preserved pentimenti grow increasingly unmistakable — altered body curves, painted-over arms and feet bleeding into the greensward, a blue-green ghost of a dog either sitting or snuffing in the emerald daubs underfoot. These visible marks of reconsideration and revision conjoin the observer and her subjects in the stream of changing perceptions and passing time.

Laced with unease, Bradford's undulating and infinitely expanding spaces breathe like the ocean while containing and supporting her forms. Their convective currents — at once atmospheric, amniotic and luminous — endlessly circulate, touching and connecting the surfaces of her beings with each other and with our own skins.

In Mark Milroy's two seated portraits, sharp contours and gritty scratchings hammer against the curvaceous charm of Matisse and Alice Neel. With "Pinafore," however, a work based on childhood recollection entwined with fantasy, Milroy lurches into a less certain world of his own making. His scraped and chiseled slabs of paint implicate the viewer in the risk and awkwardness of adolescent mystery. The raucous night-time scene, caught in the glare of a flashlight, reveals blotchy masked youths wielding paddles and swarming a white canoe in shallow water. The dense space, enjambed with thick-trunked trees and rimmed with black waters and dusky branches tangled against the fading sky feels inventive, interactive and very much alive.

A frenzied rush of disjointed marks augments the melodrama of Dan Schein's allegories of Christ in prayer and suffering on the cross (to which he partners a campy ink drawing by Hartley of a crucified man holding fish and a loaf). "Plant, Window, Horse," a more compact and modest still-life, speaks the language of bulging blobs and striated streams of paint with similar urgency and less lofty implications. A spiky, warm green houseplant balances in a terracotta pot on a window ledge amid garish puddles of lilac



Mark Milroy, *Pinafore I*, 2017, oil on canvas, 60" x 72". Courtesy of the artist and Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York.



Eric Aho, *Source*, 2019, oil on linen, 90" x 80". Courtesy of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York.

streaked with violet, pinioned from behind by a golden grid crisscrossing glass panes of a deep marine-blue. Behind the window hovers a pale green-grey smudge of a horse nuzzling at the leaves of the indoor plant. The tender gesture, so distant and futile, touches the heart.

Separated by a generation, Lois Dodd and Eric Aho share a love of observation and an instinct for abstract construction. Aho often seeks out the physical locales in Maine's western mountains where Hartley loved to paint. His towering oil-on-linen "Source," which easily dwarfs a basketball player, plants the intrepid viewer in a woody canyon, face-to-face with a thundering cataract topped by a clear vista of distant plains and clouds. Unexpectedly, just below eye level, Aho flips the middle ground in our faces and slips us into an abyss of chaotic slashes, smears and drips of paint.

Dodd, whose several homes have included Maine, may refer to herself as much as Hartley when she remarks, "If you go away from a place and come back, I think you see it in a way you never saw it before." The contour sketch she's selected of Mt. Katahdin is a favorite motif of Hartley that also recalls his early likenesses of Mont Sainte-Victoire near Cézanne's home in Provence. Dodd's own daily paintings done en plein air on a quarry's edge are full of sharp cuts and faceted planes hemmed in by a claustrophobic wall. These, too, recall Cézanne's late fragmented paintings of Bibémus quarry, not far from his beloved mountain.

Hartley's outdoor studies from the 1930s of Dogtown in Rockport, Massachusetts have appealed equally to John O'Reilly's cubistic vision and Jennifer Coates' forest obsession. O'Reilly's 2009 Dogtown-Hartley Series of photomontages grapples directly with both the site and his fascination with Hartley. Remnants of the defunct pre-



colonial farming community, bathed in the surrealism of granite boulders, vagrant trees and vine-ridden stone foundations, feed O'Reilly's penchant for sudden juxtapositions of capsized boats, collapsed statues and buried photographs of male nudes. Coates' fantastical colored pencil drawings bring out the fragile forms that dwell in the spaces between the fullness of nature and the light of the imagination. In her rainbow forests, inspired by the exuberant overgrowth of nature in rural Pennsylvania, stags and snakes leap out and mythical creatures lurk in the shadows beyond rational comprehension.

Before leaving, one dares not miss the Goodbody collection of photographs. Barbara Morris Goodbody began collecting photographs around the age of 50, inspired by a philosophy of compassionate engagement

Jennifer Coates, *Satyr, Lupines, Snake*, 2022, gouache and colored pencil on paper, 9" x 12".
Courtesy of the artist and High Noon Gallery, New York.



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and the pioneer color photographer Ernst Haas, whom she met at the Maine Media Workshops in Rockland, Maine. Goodbody's collection only deepened over three decades, enlivened by her personal quest within the medium.

The empathic agenda of the American photojournalist Donna DeCesare is unmistakable. Her black-and-white gelatin silver prints have documented Central American youth throughout decades of gang warfare. In "Esperanza's World," a child sits on a bed staring toward the camera, bare knees peeping from her ruffled white dress as she cradles a pigeon. After some moments we may notice the darker side — the pistol laid close to her knee; a bloody stain under the bird on her lap.

Compassion lies not only in our awareness of impermanence but in our fascination with the revelatory power of light itself, illuminating not just what we see, but how. Todd Webb's "Third Avenue El, New York, 1946" captures a familiar, oppressive expanse of obsolete steel railway superstructure, now silent and facing demolition. But in the moment, the photographer focuses on the rays of noonday sun piercing through the airborne steel grids. Bright dots and dashes slashing across the cobblestones below cast sharp diagonals that stretch down the avenue in a dramatic perspective. The structure itself may disappear from the earth, but this record of its moment in the sun endures.

Elizabeth Michelman

LEFT: Donna DeCesare, *Esperanza's World*, 1990, gelatin silver print, 12" x 17 3/4". Bates College Museum of Art. Gift of the Barbara Morris Goodbody Collection of Photographs.

RIGHT: Dan Schein, *Plant, Window, Horse*, 2021, oil on canvas, 20" x 16". Courtesy of the artist and Galleri Tom Christoffersen, Copenhagen, Denmark.



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