

LAND HO!

FITCHBURG PAIRS HISTORICAL WITH CONTEMPORARY

"Land Ho!" the impressive new show at the Fitchburg Art Museum (FAM), is a must-see. Mary M. Tinti's sixth curatorial project is the result of nearly one year of extensive research on FAM's permanent collection utilizing her keen eye for contemporary New England art. Koch Curatorial Fellow Emily M. Mazzola, whose knowledge of 19th and 20th century American Art brought to light the personal stories behind many of the treasures that FAM owned, assisted Tinti. The results are surprising and wide sweeping, pulling into focus the evolution of landscape painting, mark-making and myriad contemporary approaches to this genre.

The exhibition is installed in nearly all of the newly renovated galleries on the second floor and bridge of the museum. Nick Capasso joined FAM nearly three years ago, and with his appointment as director came some bold changes. Every single gallery has been renovated except for one, and going forward every rotating exhibit will be devoted to contemporary art.

ON A MISSION

"New England artists feel underserved by their local art institutions who have turned their sights to national and international artists," Capasso said. Therefore, his mission is to feature them at FAM. "Land Ho!" is the second in an ongoing series of exhibitions pairing contemporary artists in conversation with the artwork in their collection (the first featured the still life genre two years ago, and a forthcoming show will focus on portraiture).



Sue McNally, *Maroon Bells, Colorado* (from the series *This Land Is My Land*), 2014, oil on canvas, 90" x 114".

If the Fitchburg Art Museum had mounted a show of landscape paintings, drawn solely from its permanent collection, there would be obvious gaps. By hanging historical works in dialogue with works by contemporary artists, Tinti creates a conversation of art-historical importance. Images by Charles Burchfield, Edward Hopper, Charles Sheeler and Rockwell Kent

are hung together, the show's press release noted, "in a magnificently interspersed, intergenerational, multi-scaled mash-up of landscapes old and new, iconic and fantastic, universal and personal."

At the entrance, one is greeted by Yvonne Twining Humber's majestic canvas "Haying." Humber's approach to landscape was fueled by necessity.

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185 ELM STREET
FITCHBURG,
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She painted during the Depression for the WPA's Federal Arts Project, and since she could not afford a studio, she worked outdoors.

The exhibit features 30 modest-scale canvases from FAM's perma-

political, conceptual and imaginative renderings by a generation of artists whose influences differ greatly from their predecessors.

If landscape by definition evokes, "An expanse of scenery that can be

BY HANGING HISTORICAL WORKS IN DIALOGUE WITH WORKS BY CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS, TINTI CREATES A CONVERSATION OF ART-HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE.

nent collection alongside artwork ranging from the intimate to the monumental by eight contemporary New England artists: Carrie Crane, Sally Curcio, Leila Daw, Warner Friedman, Michele Lauriat, Sandy Litchfield, Shona Macdonald and Sue McNally. Placing these artists in the canon of art history allows us to see the evolution from descriptive, representational landscape styles to

seen in a single view" (thefreedictionary.com), then this show is sure to expand one's definition to include a multiplicity of approaches to the subject. The exhibit is punctuated by such brilliant pairings as Sally Curcio's "Metropolis," with a memory landscape from the Luba people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These historic "lukasa" are made of wood and beads, serving as a



LEFT: Michele Lauriat, *Untitled from the series Beyond/Return*, 2014, mixed media on paper, 65" x 55".
RIGHT: "Land Ho!" installation view (courtesy of Charles Photographics).

blueprint of royal family compounds. Another such juxtaposition is Sandy Litchfield's "Turn Around Town" and Rockwell Kent's "Monadnock Afternoon." Such pairings and salon-style groupings underscore the serendipitous connections between one generation and another – literally worlds apart.

Leila Daw's "Calling the Earth to Witness" is majestic, not only in the beading technique that she learned in an artist residency in Myanmar, but in its deeply profound message that we share the same water the world over. In a similar vein, Sue McNally takes an iconic approach to landscapes in her "This Land is My Land" series, where she represents each of the 50 states in a single canvas. Artists such as Carrie Crane expand our notion of landscapes to include map-making; her layered pieces remind us of topographical hiking maps.

Warner Friedman's architecturally influenced paintings are crafted into bent and shaped canvases that evoke sight lines. His works blur the line between interior and exterior landscapes. Likewise, Michele Lauriat's work observes the organic shapes of the landscape as they interact with the geometric shapes of the built environment. Perhaps the most quirky of all are Shona Macdon-



Carrie Crane, *Braided Stream Non-Conformity*, 2010, acrylic on Lexan, 12" x 36".

ald's landscape scenes with familiar interruptions of traffic cones, driveway reflectors and dig safe flags.

I came to several conclusions after seeing this show. With the advent of photography, the realistic landscape paintings of one era gave way to a more subjective approach, resulting in quirky, enigmatic abstractions referring to place. One wonders if anyone would even categorize these contemporary artists as landscape artists if it were not for the context of this show.

As a case in point, Sally Curcio builds landscapes of both real and imaginary places such as Miami Beach and the Sherwood Forest using small beads. In addition, she creates large-scale photographs of these intimate scenes that translate the literal renderings of the landscapes into visual textures and colorful patterns. Hers are the only sculptures and photographs in the show, and both media add depth and dimension to the presentation and pacing of the exhibition rooms.

"Land Ho!" was the sailors' cry in announcing the sight of land. Yet, in this context, I think it calls attention to a new era for the Fitchburg Art Museum and its exciting approach to curating and exhibiting its permanent collection in connection with contemporary artists from New England.