

Monhegan, The Unfailing Muse

art current

by Britta Konau

Somebody should do research to establish whether Monhegan Island constitutes the most painted, drawn and photographed 4.5 square miles of land and water in the United States. The Island Institute's Archipelago Fine Arts Gallery currently supplies proof, as if there were any need for it, that the spirit of discovery and fascination with the island is undiminished.

The exhibition *The Unfailing Muse: Monhegan* was organized in conjunction with the island's quadricentennial this year, celebrating Captain John Smith's 1614 visit to the island. The eclectic show gathers work by 26 Maine artists with connections to Monhegan. The pieces are mostly fairly traditional, with a few marked departures. Painting prevails, but there are also watercolors, pastels, screen prints, scherenschnitte, sculptures, mixed-media works, and installations. No photographs.

Viewers who have been to the island will recognize many Monhegan landmarks among the representations of its village, coast and landscape. Unfortunately, space does not allow mentioning the work of all artists; however, Kevin Beers, Alison Hill, Frances Kornbluth, Robert Pollien, Carol Sloane, and David Vickery should be singled out here for the exceptional quality of their work, which utilizes styles ranging from abstraction to ultra-realism.

A set of three paintings fortuitously focus on the arc of the sun, from bright daylight to setting and night. Holly Brooks captures in thick impasto the brilliance of light and its reflection on water as it visually breaks up sharp edges and smaller shapes to the point of loose suggestion of form only. In Connie Hayes' village scene, the warm glow emanating from a setting sun bathes everything in a glowing orange red, flattening out space and similarly eliminating detail in favor of overall atmospheric effect, not unlike memory coloring a scene in our mind. In Lynn Travis' nocturne, moonlight reflecting off the sea and



Kate Cheney Chappell, "Go Inside the Stone" (detail), 1995/2014, mixed media

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very few indoor lights are the only sources of illumination, creating a vaguely unsettling scene. Together with the vastness of sky above, the image perfectly captures a feeling of smallness, of vulnerability, that comes with occupying a speck of land in the ocean. Without explicitly referencing the island's isolation, these paintings are vivid reminders of how much activities on the island, including vision itself, are governed by the availability of natural light.

Several works of equal distinction depart in their subjects and style from the rest of the group, in some cases significantly. Kate Cheney Chappell's installation "Go Inside the Stone," inspired by a Charles Simic poem of the same title, is perfectly placed in the gallery's window and one of its corners, at the edges of space. Combining round beach stones and printed cutouts with loops of reflecting and distorting Mylar, it is a smart and beautiful evocation of the tidal shore and its flora and fauna.

At first glance, Dylan Metrano's images appear to be color woodcuts but they are scherenschnitte, cut paper, in which black paper acts as line and underlying swatches of paper supply the color. This graphic clarity lends itself to simplification and patterning so that the "Island Inn" turns into clapboard geometry against unmodulated blue sky. It also encourages whimsy. Note the seagull resting in a chimney top in the "Gussow House." A similar lightheartedness informs Mike Stiler's "Leo." The imaginative use of driftwood, wood scraps and wire for this leonine portrait relief reflects an island mentality of wasting nothing while fashioning your own world. As far as subject is concerned, "Leo" could suggest a fierce island independence.

Dyan Berk's layered drawing of Mylar, colored gels, acrylic and ink, "Deepfun II," initially seems pure invention. A loose grid of colored, irregular rectangles is overlaid with whimsical shapes outlined in black that are vaguely organic and irreverently disregard their place assignments within the layout. But then one starts to wonder, is that a jellyfish? Sea foam? Flowers, fruit, lichen, and fungal growth? Maybe, but playful artistic invention trumps all recognizability here.

Kenny Cole's argumentative drawing/writing "Outdoor Enthusiasm" is highly iconoclastic in this context. The artist assails corporate marketing of outdoor gear and equipment to those who can afford it but probably spend very little time actually using it. Instead, he advocates leaving nature alone. Should we really evacuate the island? A lot of artists would have to go in search of new inspiration - Monhegan, the unfailing muse for observation, invention and argument.