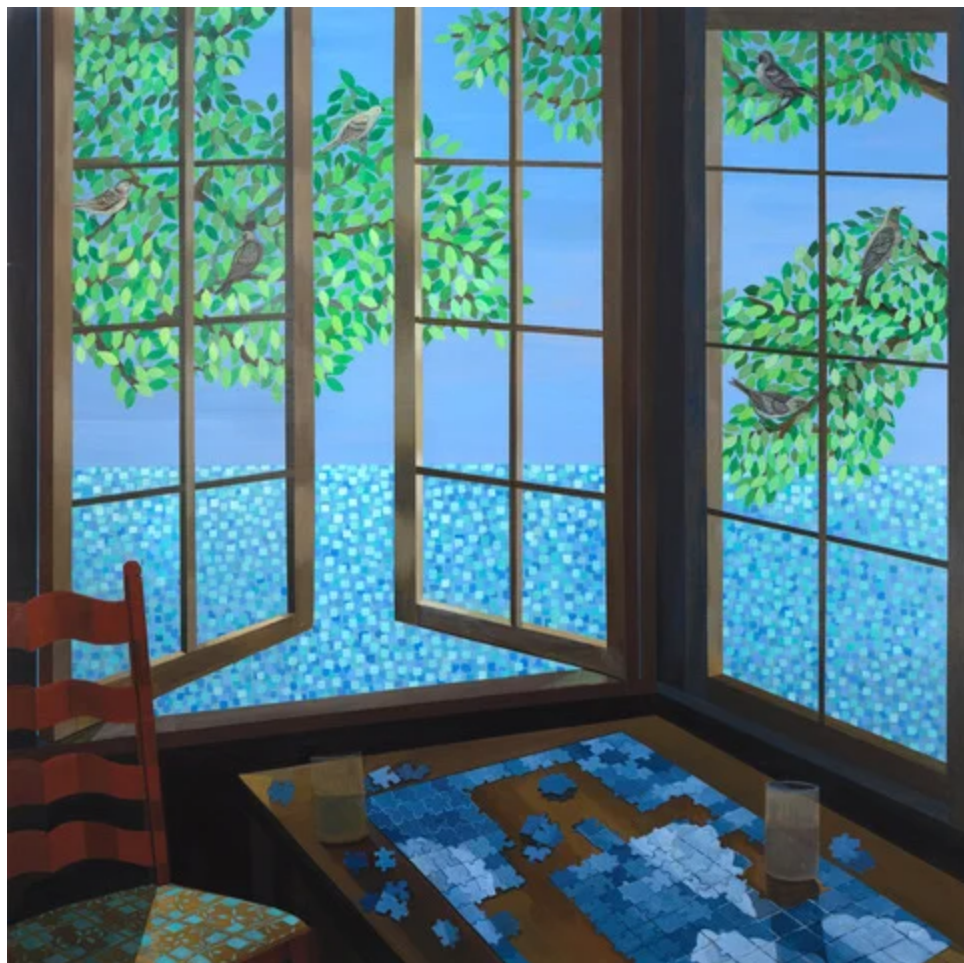


# Art review: Painters go to different depths in Portland, Rockland shows

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By Jorge S. Arango

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Gail Spaien, "Observed Landscape 7," 2022, acrylic on linen, 48 x 48 inches

*Photo by Luc Demers*

In case it's escaped notice, there's so much going on this summer on the Maine art scene that, several times, I've written about multiple shows in one review to try to cover more of it.

Sometimes these shows have a common thread; other times not. At the most basic level, what connects "Activated Spaces" at Alice Gauvin Gallery in Portland and two shows at Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland – Lois Dodd's "Working Women and By the River" and the companion exhibitions "New Watercolors" (Al Crichton) and "New Work" (Brenda Free) – is painting. All close Sept. 11.

But these also offer an opportunity to contemplate how the illusion of depth, or lack of it, contributes to the work of various artists. “Activated Spaces” is, curatorially speaking, about the objects, color and light that the four artists on display – Sarah Lubin, Mark Milroy, Brian Rego and Gail Spaien – select and how they “activate” the spaces of their canvases. Yet the space itself is what intrigues me the most about this show.

Depth of space is a tricky matter. The illusion of it is a revered tradition, something that one-point perspective dramatically enhanced in the Renaissance. But many modern movements, particularly Pop art, eschewed space for a more flat, in-your-face countenance (behold Andy Warhol). Flatness can come off as cartoonish, which works when the association is cleverly exploited (Roy Lichtenstein), or when it adopts graphic art to comment on pop culture (Robert Indiana, Warhol).

At Gauvin (actually a pop-up of Nancy Margolis Gallery in New York), Spaien’s work walks this exceedingly thin line. Her paintings – like Will Barnet’s or Alex Katz’s – come precariously close to graphic art in their flatness. They are pleasant scenes of idyllically composed views, usually looking out over a Maine seascape. There is a horizon line, but it never feels really that far in the distance. In “Observed Landscape #7,” the jigsaw puzzle on the table inside the windows looks practically on the same plane as the glittering sea beyond it. She is pulling together favorite objects and forms – a rattan chair, a lighthouse, a tree – into quasi-utopian vistas that offer a respite from the thrum and buzz of our busy lives.

This technique could have been schmaltzy with more depth of field (just imagine the same scene painted by Thomas Kinkade, for example). Yet here the flatness aligns Spaien’s paintings more closely with both Japanese art – whether you’re talking about Hokusai or Murakami’s postmodern Superflat movement – and many forms of geometric abstraction, from Kasimir Malevich to Al Held (most evident in the interpretation of light glistening on the surface of the water as a sea of variously shaded squares).



Mark Milroy, "Last Day of Autumn," 2021, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches

*Photo courtesy of the artist*

Milroy displays more three dimensionality than Spaien, but then inserts something in the foreground that severely foreshortens the image. In the wonderfully odd painting "Last Day of Autumn," we see horsemen further back in the woods and a group of bizarrely colored, sculptural sawn tree trunks (as well as a horse head) through the flattening element of three trees in the foreground.

In his "Still Life with Snake," a clear reference to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, that troublesome asp curls atop a marvelously rendered slab of wood, which pulls the focus smack up to the surface.

In Lubin's paintings, foreground and background are not only compressed, they fuse together in mind-bending ways. In "The Spoon," the body of a cat (which seems an obvious reference to Barnett) looks partially in front of fence-like grid, while the other half is behind it. The woman's face appears partially shaded behind a surreal, de Chirico-like glove, while her leg and boot seem parallel to the plane in which the glove exists.



Sarah Lubin, "Esplanade," 2019, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches *Photo courtesy of the artist*

In "Esplanade," a flower-dotted meadow moves from background to foreground by becoming the skirt of one of the subjects and the hat and face of another. A reclining figure at the "back" has a triangular head reminiscent of Lynn Chadwick's sculptures. Clearly Lubin is referencing a wide vocabulary of art history, meanwhile leaving the viewer fascinatingly suspended somewhere between planes.

In four of the six Rego paintings on display, depth becomes important as a tool for conveying a destabilizing sense of warped horizon or, as in “Encircled,” eerily disquieting menace. In the latter, our perspective on a woman walking her dog is aerial. We might think the “encircled” of the title refers to the trees that ring the seaside park she’s in – until we notice the shadows of three birds circling her and see that she appears to be running away from them as she looks uncomfortably over her shoulder. The space between our overhead vantage point and the ground is suddenly filled with tension.

In “Fishing Day,” “Girl on a Dock” and “Girl in a Garden,” the horizon line bends, much like the view pilots see outside the cockpit, which appears to mirror the contour of the planet. It sets us visually spinning, especially when Rego inserts a flattening element (i.e., the dock), further confounding our perception of depth.

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