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Art review: Greenhut's 'Portland Show' presents expansive view

By DANIEL KANY

Greenhut Galleries' sixth biennial "Portland Show" is a terrific exhibition. It presents a solid view of art in Maine from the perspective of Portland's oldest gallery. It's an invitational show, so it doesn't pretend to give up its own involvement. In fact, the sense of community associated with the show is an appealing quality; presenting gallery artists alongside respected colleagues and potential additions to the roster makes for an interestingly expansive view of Greenhut's vision of worthy Maine art.



"Silver Light on the Waterfront, Portland," oil on panel by Ben Aronson.



"The Thomas Block," oil on canvas by Joseph Nicoletti.

ART REVIEW

"2012: THE SIXTH BIENNIAL PORTLAND SHOW"

WHERE: Greenhut Galleries, 146 Middle St., Portland

WHEN: Through April 28

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday to Friday; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday

INFO: 772-2693; www.greenhutgalleries.com

The "Portland" theme also has some surprisingly subtle effects. Primarily, it gives the viewer a clear and simple starting point for considering each work in context.

However, it also presents a Portland-centered art community that is multifaceted, healthy and forward-looking. Considering that Greenhut is considered relatively conservative as well as the most established gallery in Portland, the freshness of this show is most welcome. (Then again, no gallery could have survived this long if it didn't grow with the times.)

I hope the painting that excited me the most is a sign of the future at Greenhut: Ben Aronson's "Silver Light on the Waterfront, Portland." It is a view looking down Commercial Street past the Custom House.

Aronson already has a chunk of national prominence for his Wall Street and San Francisco scenes, but his connection to Maine is a perfect fit. There's a bit of sizzle to his stroke, and he paints with a self-aware boldness which he — amazingly — knows how to keep in check. His sense of strong contrast gives his paintings substantial volume while setting a stage for a range of lighter, atmospheric tones to play out beyond the deep shadows and dazzling highlights.

Aronson's facility with a brush betrays a reverence for classical painting, but his chops reveal he has taken from Bay Area painters as well (Christopher Brown and Wayne Thiebaud in particular).

Another painter in the show who has been successful in New York is Linden Frederick. His small and tight night scene on a wharf makes it clear why that's the case. His technique is phenomenal, and his vision is just creepy enough to add the right amount of narrative tension. Nothing is missing from the scene per se, but there is just enough electricity to hold you in a state of liminal excitement. Rather than a movie still, it's more like a scene from a gripping novel.

There are several paintings that strike a narrative vein similar to Frederick's "Wharf." Thomas Connolly's "Clark Street Sunrise" rides a strangely glowing green palette past mere color observation towards something potentially odd – and interesting.

Lori Tremblay's "Early November Canopy" is a view up past dark city buildings towards a night sky defined by a constellation. It's clearly a moment of awareness, but is the ontological intensity the result of a mystical moment, an existential crisis or a flash of celestial majesty within an urban landscape?

Glenn Renell's view across the water to the SoPo tanks at first seems like a nicely colored sunset, but the Fairfield Parrish sky gives it a dreamy sense of oddly fantastical potential.

A particular favorite is Joe Nicoletti's "The Thomas Block" because of its de Chirico-like blend of vivid intensity and uncanny surrealism: The roof of a building is subtly missing, as though there were nothing beyond the facade walls.

Nicoletti enforces the distinction between the building and the far shore with a tiny, but firm, stroke of water, as though drawing a line between the waking world of seascape and the Kafka-esque world of dreams pictured by the old building and its darkened row of warehouse windows.

This is not to say the show is dominated by high focus landscapes with narrative overtones. In truth, nothing dominates it. Some of the strongest works match little else, if anything, in the show.

I was fascinated, for example, by Robert Shetterly's portrait of Gerald H. Talbot – a Bangor native with a personal history of worthy accomplishment. Richard Wilson's "A Day with Sandy K" is a large watercolor grid of 192 little scenes. They look like images of the mental gymnastics of a sweetly good-natured stalker with ADHD completely in love with his complicit subject. It's hilarious.

There are terrific pieces made of altered maps as well as some strong collage paintings. I am not a huge fan in general of Tom Paiement's work, but I think his "Harbor Dive" – two white legs pointing up with a painted newsprint splash – is terrific. Tom Hall's small, profiled cityscapes of cut newspaper are great.

Ben Lambert's ceramic "Liveaboard" depicts a standing young woman holding up the wooden boat on which she lives by its bow. It's a complex sculpture in the round (depressingly unusual for Maine) that is ultimately defined by its metaphorical complexity rather than its sweetness.

Considering this is a show based on a place, it is pleasantly surprising that the "Portland Show" is utterly devoid of nostalgia. I don't think that was a conscious conceptual decision as much as it reflects an aesthetic ethic that is thoughtful, rigorous and contemporary.

For lack of space, I haven't mentioned many of my favorite artists (John Whalley, Lissa Hunter, Nancy Morgan Barnes, etc.) who were among the 54 invited to the show. My suggestion is that you see them all for yourself.