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Review · Arts & Entertainment

In 2 shows coming to a close, charming wall sculptures and a loose take on mentorship

'Kitty Wales: Drift' is on a view at Speedwell Contemporary until Saturday, and 'Generations' is up for a couple weeks at Maine Art Gallery in Wiscasset.

Posted May 26 **Jorge S. Arango**

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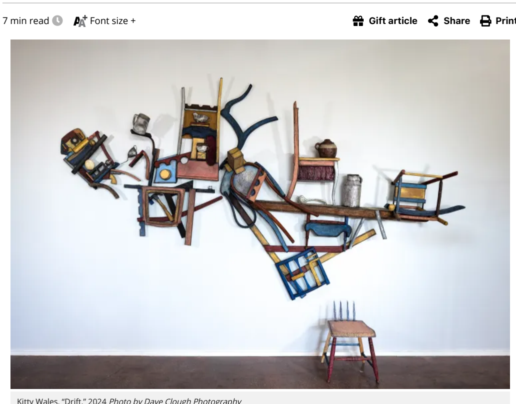

Kitty Wales, "Drift," 2024 *Photo by Dave Clough Photography*

Two shows are soon coming to an end, one next weekend in Portland and the other two weeks from now in Wiscasset.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Kitty Wales: Drift"
WHERE: Speedwell Projects, 630 Forest Ave., Portland
WHEN: Through June 1
HOURS: Noon to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday
ADMISSION: Free
INFO: 207-805-1835, speedwellprojects.com

WHAT: "Generations: The Legacy of Mentors"
WHERE: Maine Art Gallery, 15 Warren St., Wiscasset
WHEN: Through June 9
HOURS: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday through Sunday (plus, noon to 6 p.m. Tuesday, May 28, and Wednesday, May 29)
ADMISSION: Free
INFO: 207-687-8143, maineartgallerywiscasset.org

Just for its beguiling charm alone, it would be a pity for "Kitty Wales: Drift" at Speedwell Contemporary (through June 1) to pass you by. The gallery is extending hours to offer folks more time to see it during its last week.

You have a bit more time to get to the Midcoast to see "Generations: The Legacy of Mentors" at Maine Art Gallery (through June 9).

TELLING STORIES

The through-line in the sculptural work of Belfast-based Kitty Wales – whether it springs from studying reef sharks in the Bahamas, feral goats in Scotland or creating the wall sculptures featured in "Drift" – is narrative. Wales works with repurposed and discarded materials, which automatically imbue her sculptures with a sense of time and memory, of things that have lived a life of purpose and meaning, and that may also have circuitous connections to other things (the environment, our sense of our past, even to human figures we might not perceive when we first look at them).

The work at Speedwell arises from travels to Mexico, where Wales encountered ancient Mayan and Aztec codices. These pictograms chronicled bloodlines, sacred rituals, agricultural practices, daily events and more, all within a palette of colors that made an impression on Wales. They were narrative in the sense that they told stories of everyday life, and they also made connections to pantheistic beliefs of Mesoamerican civilizations and their deep link to the land and its creatures.

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On her return to Maine, Wales started making connections, too – between these codices and memories of her grandfather, a mining engineer who had spent time in Mexico. The results are wall sculptures, some site-specific to Speedwell, that reverberate with a spirit of times and lives past. In several, she incorporates objects, such as a dented coffee pot and cup, that belonged to her grandfather. Though their meaning is personal, the viewer needn't know a thing about what they reference.

Kitty Wales, "Perc," 2024 *Photo by Dave Clough Photography*

Instead, what these sculptures can conjure is the idea that they might have been found in an old, abandoned house and assembled in a way that reanimates the memories they hold. Chair parts, rolling pins and funnels, a picture frame, a cabinet's decorative detail, a wheel, a bell, a milk jar … all of these might have been used and lovingly handled at one time by the residents of this house. The way Wales links them, equally lovingly, relates a narrative one can loosely read from left to right, a story with elements of their path in the world, and also of the way they came together in this time.

Individual elements aren't necessarily original objects but, rather, recreations of them. Wales covers everything in paper and paper pulp then obsessively infuses the components with individual life by layering thousands of colored-pencil marks, finally yielding a palette drawn from the codices, but also reminding us of school art projects where we obscured a picture with black then scraped it away to reveal the original image as if seen through a veil. This process simultaneously evokes something childlike and a heightened sense of age and time passing.

The works can also call to mind the jerry-rigged contraptions of a Hayao Miyazaki animated film or the Tin Man from the Wizard of Oz. Often, too, there is a figure hidden within the form. The title piece, for instance, began with the idea of a reclining figure, with the leftmost group of objects standing in for a head and the body stretching out toward the right. The assemblages are enchanting, as well as mind-blowingly complex. It's a winning combination.

MUSES AND MENTORS

"Generations" ostensibly explores the theme of mentorship between artists and has two parts. The first floor is devoted to a "juried exhibit of member artists (of the Maine Art Gallery) along with statements that describe their mentors and the influences on their current work," according to the exhibition statement. The second floor, according to the same description, consists of "Maine Art Gallery 'generations' artists from the 1950s and '60s, and the influence those artists had on a younger group of artists."

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It sounds a lot more straightforward than it is. For one thing, the definition of "mentor" is interpreted very broadly on the first floor. Case in point, Kathy Bouchard counts among her mentors Aubrey Beardsley, Edvard Munch, Vincent van Gogh, the Wyeths and Mother Nature. Marcia Brandwein cites the Impressionists and singles out van Gogh (actually a post-Impressionist) and André Derain (who is more appropriately identified with the Fauves, a group he co-founded with Matisse and Vlaminck).

Clearly, these artists couldn't have been mentors, in the strict sense, as they had long ago left this earthly plane when Bouchard and Brandwein began painting. By opening the definition to include what are truly muses or inspirations rather than actual mentors, the show inadvertently dilutes the quality of this special relationship between artists.

This is not consistent throughout this part of the show. There are interesting pairings that seem natural, such as the two images that greet us: "Shimmy" by Kathryn Shagas and "Land Is Life" by Amy Kustra. The paintings share a similar palette, even though Shagas' is a completely abstract work incorporating acrylic, drawing and collage on yupo paper, and Kustra's is an acrylic landscape on paper. We can sense a lively conversation between them, with Shagas' looking almost like a deconstructed version of Kustra's, or perhaps depicting the abstract energy that might pulse within Kustra's landscape.

Yet are these paintings and their painters connected? Wall labels do not mention them ever meeting. Shagas talks about her mentors in an amorphous sense, never naming names. Kustra, meanwhile, lists Michelangelo, Egon Schiele, Robert Henri and Joan Mitchell. Henri makes sense, as does Michelangelo regarding the palette. Mitchell, though? Really? It is, in fact, Shagas who recalls Mitchell.

Things upstairs are much more cogent and cohesive. One confusion that continues from the first to second floor is that labels sometimes refer to paintings that are not in the vicinity. One example is Lois Dodd and Jeff Epstein. The label, written by Epstein, describes how Dodd influenced his approach to painting. It appears below a portrait he did of his mentor, which hangs, with another Dodd work, on one side of the door that offers entry to the gallery.

However, two of Epstein's works – both beautiful and one, "Move It," redolent with greens as well as with Dodd's spirit – hang in a corner on the opposite side of the door, with other artists' paintings between these and the portrait. Why split them instead of hanging them all within a certain proximity that helps the viewer make the visual connections? It can be confounding.

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Paintings to the left and assemblages in front by Matt Barter, and paintings in middle and right by his father, Philip Barter. *Photo by Bob Bond*

On the other hand, a temporary wall in the middle of the gallery very effectively articulates the mentorship of Philip Barter and his son Matt Barter. Two paintings by Matt are on the left, next to two paintings by Philip. We see the clear affinities of their forms, which can recall Arthur Dove or Milton Avery in the way elements like trees and perspectives are abstracted and flattened or skewed. Yet we can also plainly discern their differences too, mainly in palette, with Philip's running to earthy natural tones and Matt's drifting into brighter, bolder pinks, oranges and blues. Before this wall stand two sculptures by Matt, which further differentiate the father and son styles.

Stow Wengenroth, "Summer Dusk" *Courtesy of Maine Art Gallery*

Other successful juxtapositions are Gregory Dunham and his mentor Stow Wengenroth. The latter, a masterful lithographer, eschewed color completely. Yet within this limited palette, he achieved incredible detail, as evidenced by "Summer Dusk." This hangs with Dunham's own lithograph "Quiet Cove," making their synergies apparent. Nearby, however, is a Dunham watercolor called "Up for Repairs," which illustrates how he found his own voice using color.

Gregory Dunham, "Quiet Cove" *Courtesy of Maine Art Gallery*

On the other side of the temporary wall where the Barters hang is an intriguing group of Joseph Fiore's works that careen among genres – landscape to Dove-like semi-abstractions to Paul Klee-like geometries. And near the most abstract of these untitled works hangs a watercolor called "Gem" by Fiore's mentee David Dewey where we can discern obvious similarities in palette, form and paint dilution and application.

There is beautiful work throughout, as well as pieces that feel a bit like they were created by earnest Sunday painters. There's an argument to be made that some more rigorous curating might have produced a tighter, more compelling exhibition, one perhaps half this size. But there are, nevertheless, many works worth viewing, even if one must toggle back and forth between walls to extrapolate the relevant information of who taught whom and which artist(s) influenced another.

Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland. He can be reached at: jorge@jsarango.com

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