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Painting the Town: CMCA's 2025 Biennial

At the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, painting anchors the exhibition's sense of cohesion, highlighting both the strengths—and constraints—of a medium-forward lens in Maine's contemporary scene.

Review by [Jorge S. Arango](#)



Installation view, "2025 Biennial," Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockland, ME, 2025. Courtesy of the Center for Maine



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or artworks that don't say much at all. We're such a pluralistic society these days, where artists are influenced by an overwhelming onslaught of contradictory information and disparate cultural and world events—not to mention personal inspiration—that it is next to impossible to make any grand, sweeping statements without being immediately criticized, either for generalization or omission.

And, of course, there are the jurors. It's unlikely that personal tastes don't color their decisions, so biennials cannot be viewed as impartially detached and unbiased. The "2025 Biennial," currently on view through January 11, 2026, at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, is no exception.

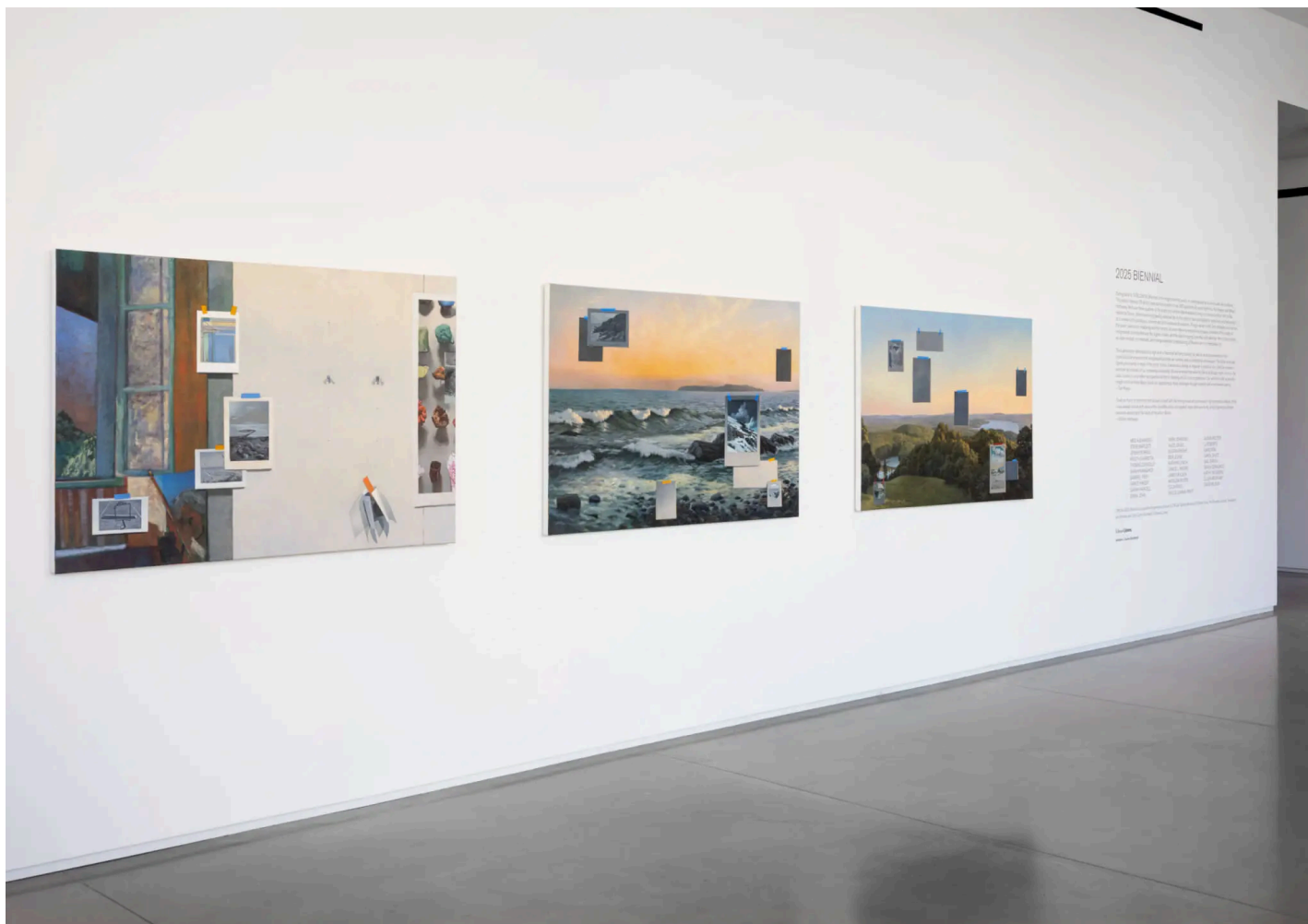
The jurors in this case were Keith Fox, Tom Keyes, and William Hathaway. The former two are collectors with a vast knowledge of the art of Maine and a collection to back it up (Fox spent eleven years as CEO of Phaidon Press and Artspace, while Keyes is a portfolio manager for a New York-based investment firm; both are active in the Maine art scene). Hathaway, who grew up in Mt. Desert Island, Maine, is a partner and sales director at Night Gallery in Los Angeles and helped establish a collaboration between the gallery and DUNES in Portland. Indubitably, they know of what they speak.



Installation view, "2025 Biennial," Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockland, ME, 2025. Courtesy of the Center for Maine Contemporary Art.

My initial surprise: This is the first biennial I can remember (here or anywhere) in which the exhibition seems to speak with a coherent voice. And what that voice is declaring is that Maine, a state principally associated with great painting, is still in the thrall of that medium. It's essentially a painting show, with a smattering of drawing, sculpture, video, and photography. As someone currently writing a book about the astonishing diversity of the Maine art scene, I found this peculiar, to say the least. I cannot know whether that variety was reflected in the more than 450 applications received. If not, one cannot fault the jurors. And it's entirely possible that other artforms submitted were not of high enough caliber. So, that point remains a conundrum for me.

Having said that, within the genre of painting, the trend (if one can call it that) is toward figuration or figural abstraction. One of the effects of this is to magnetize our attention to the purest abstractionist in the lot, David Row, who reveals, in his mid-seventies, just how hardworking, complex, and elementally beautiful (read: not slick) minimalism can be. Row is justifiably famous for his irregularly shaped canvases segmented by lines that feel more like fissures in the surface, so that the interior shapes they define appear to be floating. The more we look, the more they slip and slide around, fracturing and faceting, looming and receding. The gold



(left to right) James Mullen, *In the Studio*, *Window Prouts Neck*, *Window Olana*, installation view, all 2025. All oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches. Installation view, "2025 Biennial," Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockland, ME, 2025. Courtesy of the Center for Maine Contemporary Art.

Without question, we're treated to a surfeit of wonderful objective painting. For a biennial so preoccupied with this medium, it opens—quite appropriately—with three marvelous canvases by James Mullen. They are views of landscapes through studio windows of three artists: Mullen, Winslow Homer on Prouts Neck, and Edwin Church at Olana. Taped to the windows in these images are photos or studies that serve as inspiration or ideas to explore (in Mullen's, for instance, there is a photo of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and a postcard of a Richard Diebenkorn work).

These paintings are about what and how painters see and work. They also question the process by which a landscape takes form on canvas—is it merely the transfer of an observation made outside onto the canvas inside? Or as a view emanating from the artist's imagination after being



Ellen Weitkamp, *Early Afternoon Light*, 2024. Oil on panel, 24 x 28 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Philip Lovejoy, and James Moses.

One thrilling revelation is Ellen Weitkamp, a relative newcomer to the state. Though technically it is painting—and virtuosic painting at that—her work also borrows from collage and photography. *Early Afternoon Light* (2024) is unsettling in its denial of static space. We seem to be looking at a room from several distorting angles at once and in various light conditions, as if its components are assembled and layered atop each other rather than depicted head on. Areas of it appear hyperrealist and glossy like a photograph. When there are figures, as in *April 5, 2024* (2025), they don't seem relaxed, but restless and pensive, charging the scene with ennui.

been less legible in singles or even pairs. Essentially curved strokes of gray, black, and white applied across panels with a sublime ombré effect, they're moody and quiet. But viewing a single one, except for *Moon Rising in Stormy Skies* (2024), we wouldn't appreciate the subtlety of Johnson's hand or how imperceptibly a horizon line can change over a short period of time.

Johnson's paintings are next to Row's geometric abstractions, but Row's works don't interrupt Johnson's poetic conversation with the large-scale abstract photographs by Sarah Szwajkos on the perpendicular wall. An architectural photographer by trade, Szwajkos digitally manipulates out-of-focus pictures she's taken to create what look like glowing, color-saturated horizon lines. Though they are intense where Johnson's works are still and silent, they are both evocatively atmospheric.



Meg Alexander, *Window Strike #5*, 2024. India ink on paper, 5.5 x 7.5 inches (sheet). Courtesy of the artist and Ellen Miller Gallery.

realization of every branch, bark, and leaf is miles beyond what they were just two years ago. Alexander's seven *Window Strike* birds (all of which are from 2024, with the exception of one from 2025) also display bravura drafting. Each bird—and where it fell—is so exactly realistic that the brain processes it as photography. Here, the seriality highlights how frequently this occurs, but that is incidental.

This brings me back, in a way, to painting. Grace Hager is best known for her quirky twelve-to-fourteen-inch stoneware sculptures of campfires. She has five works in this show, of which *Penumbra* (2025) departs from the witty, irresistible kitsch of its companion fires through her use of gold lustre in addition to the usual terra sigillata and glazes. This gives it an elevated aesthetic of something rather precious, in the manner, perhaps, of Nymphenburg figurines.

But Hager considers herself a more versatile artist, which is borne out by her *Lighthouse Keeper* (2021) paintings and her portraits (neither of which are included in the show). However, at the CMCA she represents the medium with *Radiance* (2023), a forty-by-forty-inch depiction of a campfire that deploys the brash palette of the sculptures. What works in one medium, however, is not necessarily successful in another, and the painting's large scale and attention-grabbing acid colors feel like an intrusion into the space. Nor do I feel that so many sculptures were necessary—except, of course, to balance the disproportionate amount of two-dimensional work with something to occupy pedestals in the middle of the room.



Sarah Haskell, *Hold Me Like a Mother: Red*, 2023. Maine beach stones, linen dyed with madder and cochineal, and crochet. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Three-dimensional sculptures that succeed include Sarah Haskell's spirals of beach stones, each rock donning crocheted partial jackets. There is something universally comforting about a spiral, but the act of crocheting "clothes" for the stones feels unbearably tender. And Steve Bartlett's life-size, exquisitely crafted, boulder-shaped wood sculptures evoke a sense of protection—like strong, silent sentinels watching over us—as well as natural beauty of both material and form. The presence they emanate is so palpable you'll want to stroke and embrace them. They reminded me of some of Martin Puryear's work, though without the difficult content that imbues those with another dimension of power.

It's unrealistic to cover every artist in the show. But I want to end with Ben Levine's single-channel video *A Fertile Moment in Time* (2025). The acclaimed videographer, known for his 2020 documentary *Crip Camp*, presents documentary footage that scrambles film clips of Maine's back-to-the-land movement and Central Maine Power Music Company in the 1970s with iconic archival photographs. These include one of Mary Ann Vecchio pleading for help as Kent State student Jeffrey Miller lies dying from police gunshot wounds and the "Napalm Girl" photo of children fleeing a napalm attack in Trang Bang, Vietnam. Mixed together are scenes of human cruelty and activist protests (both angry and filled with hippie "flower power" innocence).

current time, when the very nature of truth is doubted, realities go viral, and the administration in power flaunts its disregard for the rule of law. Not that the 1970s were a walk in the park, but we somehow knew who our enemies were and united to defuse and depose them.

Interestingly, someone younger, whose views on art I greatly respect, told me how much he loved it. For him, these images didn't feel like relics, the optimism stayed intact, and he derived hope from viewing it. Which just goes to show how ridiculous it is to make broad pronouncements about what is "good" or "bad," "valid" or "irrelevant" in art. CMCA's Biennial certainly sparked a lot of questions in my mind, which is what art shows should do. But it also affirmed the highly subjective nature of these (or any) exhibitions, and how any grand pronouncements about what they mean are essentially fugacious.

"2025 Biennial" is on view through January 11, 2026, at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, 21 Winter Street, Rockland, ME.



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