

CHRISTOPHER VOLPE: ON LOCATION: PLEIN-AIR PAINTINGS OF THE SEACOAST

Kennedy Gallery
41 Market Street
Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Through May 31

CHRISTOPHER VOLPE IS ONE OF THOSE RENAISSANCE MEN IN THE ARTS, SOMEONE WHO IS ABLE TO COMBINE THE MUSICAL — HE PLAYS GUITAR AND PIANO — WITH THE VISUAL, IN WHICH HE’S GRADUALLY MAKING A NAME FOR HIMSELF AS A REALIST PAINTER.



The Wentworth in the Rain, 2012, oil on linen mounted on wood, 8" x 10".

After working for 15 years as a professional writer — successfully navigating the public relations realm writing advertising copy and PR, he left Long Island to earn a graduate degree in poetry at the University of New Hampshire. The literary arts experience allowed him to teach college English and poetry and then, while teaching classes in art history, he discovered the American landscape tradition. It was there that his heart and career took a detour as he fell in love with the 19th century Barbizon and Tonalism landscape artists.

Largely self-taught, Volpe learned to “work backwards,” in that he was articulate and skilled with words, but lacked the technical skills to execute art. Yet he wasn’t afraid to wade into

the water. He took classes, studied the realist painters and mustered the courage to pick up a brush and venture into the visual arts. That was a mere five years ago, and now his realist paintings, which border on abstract, at times, more than hold their own.

“On Location: Plein-Air Paintings of the Seacoast,” his current solo show of 25 works at Kennedy Gallery in Portsmouth, runs through the end of May. The works represented are renditions of his favorite byways in coastal Maine, Portsmouth, Rye, Newburyport and other shorefront environs.

Volpe’s exhibition of landscape paintings captures the region’s rural spirit that many times blends into atmospherically abstracted pieces portraying some of his favorite subjects: twilight, misty streams, swamps, seasonally changing trees, rolling clouds. His work expresses inner states embodied in the geometry and imagery of nature. So, indeed, Volpe leans toward the poetic beauty that can be coaxed from interaction with landscape as well as in the new forms of artistic expression since modernism.

Volpe’s goal is beautiful works. And yet, he’s a believer in Francis Bacon’s idea that “there is no excellent beauty

that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.” For Volpe, that’s what keeps it real.

A rewarding exercise for Volpe is to paint a plein-air piece and then go home and recreate it. Inevitably these “recreations” are richly textured and exhibit more depth. An excellent example of that is “Awcomin Marsh, Rye.” Much like the works of George Inness, a Tonalist artist Volpe admires, the piece is atmospheric. The landscape is recognizable, yet is an abstract metaphor and not totally defined.

“For me, art isn’t about accuracy, most of it’s about feeling,” Volpe says. “Working outdoors involves the artist directly in the process of perception and representation of reality, and it demands that you be ‘present’ in a very immediate way.”



Memorial Bridge in Fog, 2012, oil on linen mounted on wood, 8" x 10".

He says that is why five different realists paint the same subject and end up with five different pictures.

He wants his paintings to reflect his feelings about the world as well as about how we respond to the world through the medium of art.

In addition to his realist landscape works, Volpe is enthralled by more abstract renderings of landscapes that include structures such as bridges (like Portsmouth’s “Memorial Bridge in Fog”) or buildings.

A long-time admirer of Stuart Shils, an artist whose landscapes dwell on the uncertain border between representation and abstraction, Volpe sometimes reflects that influence in his work — “Wentworth By the Sea,” for instance. You know by the Mansard-roofed architecture of the piece that it is the Wentworth (the historic grande dame hotel in New Castle, NH), yet it crosses over into something more elusive, harder to evoke: the mood of a locale and the temper of its weather. The piece is masterfully executed.

Perhaps next Volpe will round his repertoire of skills to include medieval dance?

| Linda Chestney