



Abstracting the Seacoast

Six Artists Re-Envision the Familiar

Christopher Volpe

The other day someone I follow online dropped something potentially life-changing: “It’s amazing how reframing the question from *How do I solve this problem?* to *Help me notice when the answer appears* can work in surprising ways.”

The difference is between a rational, head-on approach and an attentive, intuitive one. An artist in the landscape asking, *How shall I paint what I see?* is doing something different from the artist asking, *How shall I paint what I notice when I look?* The difference involves a subtle but

significant shift of attention, often with results closer to transformation than transcription. Neither stance is superior, just different: Both artists must be active observers of what's there as well as alert to personal, felt response, and both must be masters of technique (defined as getting paint to do what one wants). Yet, reframing the question of *How do I paint the landscape?* can work in surprising ways.

Paintings such as those in “Abstracting the Seacoast” invoke fresh revelations of the familiar. Abstraction invites artist and viewer to take a step back from the observed and explore the space that opens up between painter and painted, seer and seen. Used as a verb, *to abstract* is to take away from, to draw off or remove, as in “to abstract water from the Piscataqua River in the form of a tidal stream” or, as in alchemy, to “abstract the essential elements” from base matter. Artists painting abstractly often seek an essence, an “inner necessity” (as Kandinsky called it), that can serve as the animating force of a painting when inexpressive, purely descriptive details are given a lower priority.



The five artists in this exhibition bypass literal rendering with intuitive responses, imaginative ideas, freely adapted rules, and at times, reinvented materials. Though the methods are non-traditional, the themes and motifs are well-known, even iconic – the red brick and white clapboard buildings of downtown Portsmouth, the celebrated waterfront with its busy docks and spindly piers, the Piscataqua’s islands, coves, salt-water marshes and granite-ledged back channels, the distinctive bridges, mills, and streets of the NH Seacoast.

The methodology is apparent in the paintings of several artists in the group who challenged themselves to re-imagine the immediately recognizable tugboats of Moran Towing Corp. (one of the oldest companies in America). Barbara Stevens Adams tosses conventional representation overboard and allows the tugs to morph into bright reconstructions of colorful energy, part cubist, part kaleidoscopic. Peter Cady’s interpretation (“Engine in a Hull,”), sighting up along a Moran tug’s hull from a very close distance and an unusually low angle, foregrounds a muscular geometry wonderfully expressive of the stout bulk of these serviceable workboats. For a totally different perspective, Tom Glover flew a drone over the waterfront to capture aerial views of the boats that he rendered in ravishing, saturated color combinations and painterly improvisations enlivened by the play of shadows and light.

In other works on display here, Glover collages Seacoast ephemera, such as topographical and maritime maps, into paintings that circumvent boundaries which the materials of painting traditionally impose. On that front, Dusty Knight's intuitive canvases record a raw, gestural

Duston Knight
Tuesday Morning 40x30" acrylic on canvas



energy that nonetheless pulls in actual bits and pieces of organic and inorganic material from the tidal channels and marshes she paints from memory – souvenirs, perhaps, from the material

world from which her spirited transcriptions of experience take flight. Brian Chu's cityscapes, as in all these artists' works, take form within the liminal space between artist and canvas, where eye, mind, and imagination, or "sensuality and issue-solving," as he calls it, have equal seats at the table.

These artists emphatically remind us that the world we think we know is what we make it: that even with iconography as an anchor, perception, artistic or otherwise, remains a subjective act, and therefore fair game for the mind and imagination as well as the eye.

The paintings in "Abstracting the Seacoast" invite active engagement, reminding us that surprising things can and indeed do happen when we let go of looking for answers and, in the words of German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, choose instead to "love the questions."

Christopher Volpe, 2021