

NO ORDINARY JANUARY, THANKS TO A COOL COUPLE OF SHOWS

Philip Isaacson - 2012
Lewis Gallery

CLAIRE SEIDL

January is typically the anemic month. Some galleries go into hibernation, some coast along with the remnants of the December shows, and some do remixes of one sort of another. It's a tough time to sell art.

But there are exceptions.

In this column, I'm going to report on one of hippest shows I've seen in years and on a splendid exhibition of classical photography.

First, the photographs. The venue is the Lewis Gallery at the Portland Public Library. The title is "Around the House: 17 Contemporary Maine Photographers." The sponsor is the Center for Maine Contemporary Art. The curator is Bruce Brown.

The results measure up to the promise of those credentials. As to media, there is about an even balance between notable works in color and those accomplished in black and white. This has not been the case in recent exhibitions; color has prevailed. Brown, however, has a taste for the classical.

Sarah Szwajkos has the good fortune to have her "Old Spools, Shades of Blue" on the show's announcement. Nine spools of thread in a sequence of hues, lined up on a demurely lit and painted ladder, give an evanescent performance. They are too conscientiously choreographed to be simply around the house, but as a lyrical expression, the work is absolutely lovely.

In images such as "Shower Stall, Scrub Brush, Two Hooks" and "Red Bag, Red Shoes," the photographer meets the prescription of the show, providing arresting images. Szwajkos draws upon the interior of the house with all of the expected warts and blemishes. It's all there, in your face, but selected by her for its geometric values.

In them, Szwajkos moves away from the lyric to a modified hard edge. She finds opportunities in which a cabinet, a door frame and a banister line up in strict vertical sequence to create a geometric interlude, perhaps even a cubist-inspired indoor landscape.

In "Anina at Rest," Noah Krell provides us with one of his enigmatic color images. There is an element in his work that is just beyond reach. You leave it with the sense that his point is brilliantly made, but that you may not have gotten it. Photography at this level is rare.

In "Anina," we are admitted to a bedroom in which, reflected in a mirror, a person is asleep. The room is handsomely accomplished, but who the sleeper is and why the person appears is not clear. Is it just a fortuitous snapshot, or is it intended to be provocative?

Kate Philbrick lowers the temperature with "End of Quest." In an elegant black-and-white print, the quest for the Holy Grail has ended. It has wound up in the hands -- and lips -- of a young boy who is putting it to use as a container for refreshment.

Claire Seidl's silver gelatin "Ink Drawing, Priscilla" has a sense of dread about it. Seidl has constructed a surreal place; around her house there is no certain distinction between interior and the out-of-doors. The forest, the night sky, a figure and architectural elements intermittently drop from the surface of the print and then rise to embrace one another. The animation is endless.



INK, DRAWING PRISCILLA

Ilyor Askinazi's silver chloride prints are notable for their craftsmanship and elegance. Here is

black-and-white photography in a rich and absorbent form. It draws the viewer in and connects him with what has become the grand tradition of modernist photography. There is weight together with an eye that organizes facts into compelling compositions.

This photographer's work in this show (all untitled) is less notable for innovation than it is for its grasp of the ideals of great art. Askinazi's images of a local skyline through venetian blinds and of a pair of shoes on a shelf reach the level in which viewer responsiveness is one of the great rewards of creating art.

There was nothing in this show that was at all unworthy, and a shortage of space prevents a presentation of the work of Thomas Birtwistle (particularly "Sink, Providence, Rhode Island") and Ben DeHaan ("Homegrown Carrots").

AND NOW to the hip show: "Drawn and Quartered: Hidden Treasures of the Studio" at Art House Picture Frames in Portland.

Alex Rheault and Abbeth Russell asked at least 50 artists to ransack their studios and provide small affordable works for sale. (I say at least 50 because that is the number who supplied work for the event. In some cases, the submissions were multiple.) Adding it all together, the place is swamped with lively, engaging works, in many cases small versions of what, in larger format, are significant efforts.

Part of the lure of the event is the fact that the works are untagged and attached to the walls with paper clamps. In order to find the name of the artist (some are, in fact, signed) or the title, you have to lift the work off the wall and examine the underside. This has to be done with clean hands and a high degree of care.

That being so, you are unlikely to remove a work unless you have a particular interest in it. It's a rare exercise in which the art on its face and not the name of the maker carries the day. It's a tough test and a lot of fun. Prices can reach \$100, but most don't.

I'll whip through a few of the items I really liked: Katie Uffelman, of a photo of a car surrounded by vines; Graham Wood, of two tiny pen-and-ink landscapes; Karen Merritt, of two black-and-white photo portraits of children; Judy Gailen's absolutely wonderful stage designs for Handel's "Semele" and of two other works; Diane Wren's untitled monoprint of delicate botanic forms; Dorothy Schwartz's black-and-white woodcut; Jeanne O'Toole Hayman's encaustic "Moving On Up" of a female nude; and Tanya Fletcher's "Black," a feet-in-your-face nude.

I'm going to stop at this juncture. I had intended to list others, but you get the point.

There's a lot to see, and most of the work are keepers. If I bought Brittany Marcoux's wild Polaroid or Susan Tureen's "Pale City," I'd hang onto them. They're good.

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