

ART REVIEW

In Maine, summer's bounty includes a bumper crop of art exhibits. E2

AUDIENCE

Deep Water/E5

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SECTION E

Finding light even in the darkest places

Jonesport painter Anne Neely's new show, 'The Wonder of the Light,' is at Elizabeth Moss Galleries through Aug. 15, as a documentary about her life also makes the rounds.



Anne Neely with her pieces “Best Clouds,” left, and “See Through Sea,” right. (GREGORY REC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

By CHLOE SWEDBERG  
Staff Writer

Every morning, Anne Neely is awoken by the sun rising over Roque Island. The artist doesn't have shades on her windows, so the light pours freely into her bedroom, and she has to decide whether to wake up and move into the light, or to stay asleep.

Though the light is an everyday occurrence for Neely, her decision to begin painting it last year came as a surprise to her.

She was in Brooklyn, thinking about her mornings back home in Jonesport, when she chose to rotate her canvas for the first time. Formerly a landscape painter, the choice to paint vertically represented a shift into a more personal and figurative creative exploration.

For Neely's new collection “The Wonder of the Light,” now on display at Elizabeth Moss Galleries in Portland through Aug. 15, she poured paint in ribbons down vertical canvases and then painted the background behind.

For Portlanders eager to hear more about the artist behind the exhibit, a short documentary about Neely will be looping at the Portland Museum of Art starting on July 17 and running through the end of summer.

FINDING THE LIGHT

Getting to the art studio in Brooklyn was difficult. Neely was recovering from the chemotherapy she undertook to treat ovarian cancer, and she had to walk up and down about 80 steps in the subway each day, relying on walking poles to keep herself steady. Then it was another 40-second walk up to her 250-square-foot apartment when the day was over. Even despite her ill health and the taxing ordeal of moving there,



Anne Neely, “In the Morning, I...,” 2025, oil on linen. (IMAGE COURTESY OF JULIA FEATHERINGILL PHOTOGRAPHY)



View from Neely's Jonesport studio in 2019. (PHOTO COURTESY OF ANNE NEELY)

Neely was thrilled to be in Brooklyn, one of only 17 artists picked out of almost 2,000 applicants by the Sharpe-Walentas Studio program, a yearlong art residency providing studio space and community to visual artists.

“By the time I got there every day, I was exhausted, but I was also invigorated because I was with 16 much younger artists. I felt very lucky and honored to be there,” said Neely.

She began her painting process at Sharpe-Walentas by setting up a ladder and developed a system to pour paint down the canvases.

The ribbons of color represented protection from the cancer — which Neely says is now in remission — but she still had to decide what to paint behind them.

The second vertical painting in Neely's “The Wonder of the Light” collection, “In the Morning, I...” shows the light in Jonesport peeking through the colorful ribbons. Neely said that her decision to bring the yellow paint all the way down the canvas caught her by surprise.

After “In the Morning, I...,” Neely decided that she wanted the background of each of the ribboned paintings in the exhibit to be the sky and the sea.

“You see all those little tiny things that I did with the ocean,” said Neely. “Well, those are all the colors that were in the ocean when the light came through or the shimmer or the whitecaps because there was lots of wind.”

Though most of the “The Wonder of the Light” paintings are vertical, the collection also includes a few horizontal paintings that represent Neely's cancer.

In these paintings, an explosion of paint mimics the chaotic multiplication of cancer cells.

Because ovarian cancer is particularly serious and stubborn, Neely

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Singer Hailey McAvoy presents healing musical at Thompson's Point

The show, presented by the nonprofit arts organization Hogfish, will be performed at The Halo at Brick South in Portland.

By AIMSEL PONTI  
Staff Writer

Singer Hailey McAvoy has lived with cerebral palsy — and music — all her life. Now, she's turned the disability into music of her own. “Wholly Unwinding” is an original musical McAvoy wrote about resilience, healing and the visible and invisible scars people carry. It comes to The Halo at Brick South at Thompson's Point in Portland for three performances next week. The show includes 16 original songs, and is part musical, part folk concert and part campfire spiritu-

als, influenced by the songs of Joni Mitchell, the Jackson Five and The Chicks, among others. The show is being presented by Hogfish, a nonprofit arts organization based in Cape Elizabeth. McAvoy has been a Hogfish artist-in-residence for the past four summers, and has been developing “Wholly Unwinding” for two years. McAvoy, 31, grew up in Natick, Massachusetts, and now lives in Kingston, New York. Music has always been part of her life. Long before she could talk, her parents said she would hum “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” Primarily an opera singer, McAvoy graduated from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, then continued her studies at Bard College Conservatory of Music, earning a master's degree in vocal



Hailey McAvoy during a 2025 Hogfish performance. (PHOTO BY MEREDITH BROCKINGTON)

performance. “Wholly Unwinding” was born out of what she called a “life-changing” experience when a music teacher suggested she try the mind-body movement practice called the Alexander Technique, created in the

Please see **MCAVOY**, Page E5

Animé-inspired ‘Roméo et Juliette’ opera remains true to Shakespeare’s play

Opera Maine is staging Charles Gounod's 1867 work on Thursday and July 26.

By STEVE FEENEY

In this election year, it may seem like all of Maine is playing a part in one big opera. Various characters try to avoid scandal and make their voices heard while the rest of us must cautiously make decisions. If all of that may seem a bit chaotic, why not take some time away and settle into a comfortable seat at Merrill Auditorium in Portland to experience a real opera? Opera Maine Director Dona D. Vaughn promises that this year's main stage production will offer “romance, conflict, spectacle, and some of the most beautiful music ever written for the stage.” With the approval of the Opera Maine board, Vaughn selected composer Charles Gounod's

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# NEELY

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must get assessed frequently to make sure she is still in remission. “Every three months, I move forward in life or back into cancer. So, of course, when I am in remission, I paint the sheer beauty of being alive in the light,” said Neely.

As the light flooded in through the gallery’s large windows, Neely stood in front of “In the morning, I...” and said, “Light was critical. You know, I could see gray, too.”

## BLENDING ART AND FILM

Neely’s decision to keep looking for and moving toward the light has earned her additional recognition. Both the National Gallery of Art and the Portland Museum of Art plan to screen a short documentary about Neely this year.

The documentary, produced by the National Gallery of Art as part of their “West to East” program, shows Neely’s life in Jonesport.

Scott Keiner, head of the production studio at the National Gallery of Art, said they chose to feature Neely — one of only seven artists in the country in their “West to East” series — because they found her inspirational. Neely will be representing the Northeastern United States.

“We loved so many things about Anne — her practice, her unique “pouring” technique, and her deep connection to the waters and people of Jonesport,” said Keiner.

The documentary also discusses Neely’s experience with cancer.

“After filming was complete, she sent us a catalog for her exhibition, and the works might as well have leapt off the page,” said Keiner. “During a really challenging time in her life, Anne found a way to create works of art to protect herself, but when I see them, I feel like she’s protecting all of us.”



Anne Neely’s current show “The Wonder of the Light” is at Moss Galleries in Portland. From left are “Woven Veil,” “Moonlight (partially showing),” “Best Clouds,” “Shimmer” and “Emerging.” (GREGORY REC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

The documentary will be released this fall on YouTube and the National Gallery of Art’s website. Keiner said to stay tuned about screenings at the gallery itself in Washington, D.C.

For Mainers interested in seeing the film before it’s released online, the Portland Museum of Art will be looping it in its gallery beside a painting of Neely’s starting July 17 and continuing through the rest of the summer.

Andrew Eschelbacher, deputy director and head of art and exhibitions at the Portland Museum of Art, said, “there’s a great moment in the film where she talks about blending colors. She’s looking out at the landscape. Her painting comes from her experience here, but it’s not limited to her experience here, and its impact isn’t limited to her experience here.”

“It’s really something that extends from Maine and makes reverberations nationally,” Eschelbacher added.

## LIFE IN A SEASIDE TOWN

Neely, who now splits



Neely painting outside her studio in Jonesport in 2019. (PHOTO BY ELLA ZONA)

her time between Jonesport and Boston, originally moved to the small Maine seaside town to be with her husband.

She was inspired by not only the light passing over Roque Island in the morning, but also the fishing community there.

When she first began painting, the artist gravitated toward realism, thinking she had to capture each moment on the ocean with the precision of a photograph.

“The beauty, I quickly learned, was not something I could replicate. I wasn’t realistic as a painter,” said Neely.

But she soon realized that she could paint her ideas and curiosity about nature in an abstract way

and that these paintings could resonate with people.

For “Water Stories,” a collection of paintings the artist created previously, she began pouring paint onto the canvas to evoke the movement of water.

Though she admired the brilliant views in Jonesport, she was also drawn to hidden water: the aquifers unseen but essential to humans,

groundwater that moves underneath us through sand and rock to supply fresh water for drinking and agriculture.

Neely’s “Water Stories” collection focuses on how humans misuse the environment, causing climate change and the host of issues it presents.

“There’s a mission in being an artist. We’re harbingers of hope. We’re harbingers of making sure people understand how precious this place is, and how important it is, both being human, but also respecting the nature around us,” said Neely from her studio in Jonesport.

Aquifers have been significantly impacted by

# Q&A

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for 18 months and at the end of it, everybody got fired. To this day, it is infamous in labor circles.

*This book also features a couple of appearances from real people, including Jesse Jackson, Cardinal Law and Ronald Reagan. Was it especially challenging to write about public figures in this book?*

The great thing, in my experience, about writing about well-known real people is that you can still fictionalize the hell out of them if you want to. Part of the reason Jesse Jackson makes that appearance at a labor rally is because that happened during the Jay strike. I lifted a lot of his dialogue in that scene from an actual speech that he made when he was running for the

Democratic primary in 1987.

When Jackson died, the media covered that aspect of his presidential run. The thrust of that coverage was, here was this guy who came to Maine to support a labor strike that was exclusively white people. He ended up garnering a ton of support, including donations from people who hadn’t worked in over a year, simply because he made the case that people should be organizing along class lines. It made a lot of sense to the audience, and I can remember even as a kid that made a lot of sense to me.

*There was a place in the novel where I found myself surprised that some of the characters were making a case for organized crime as an alternative to predatory capitalism. By the end of the book, they learn that that has its drawbacks as well. What were the challenges of*

*writing about the role of morality in this story?*

Part of what ails us culturally right now, I think, is an insistence that everything is simple. Nothing is complicated. It’s very much a binary. I do think that one can make a convincing case that organized crime as such is a response to things like capital-C Capitalism — or, more generally, the abdication of governmental responsibility. I don’t think a reasonable, intelligent person could say, no, that’s absolutely not true.

At the same time, organized crime comes with some problems, right? I feel the same way about labor unions. I’m a big proponent of labor unions. I’m a union guy myself, like my father before me, but are they perfect? Not by a long stretch. It also seems to me that we live at a time when people are determined to allow the perfect to

be the enemy of the good. Are labor unions perfect? No. Are they the only entities that have ever done anything for working class people in this country? Yes. And as such, can we accept and work on the imperfections? I think we probably should.

*You’re working on an adaptation of the first novel. How is that going — and what is it like to be working on that as you’re telling other stories with the same characters in your fiction?*

I’ve never had an experience like this as a writer where I parked myself in a particular world with a particular set of characters for as long as I have with these people. The quality of the work and the quality of the feeling that I have while doing the work is very different from anything I’ve done before, in a good way. It feels good to stay in the same place.

Ultimately, I think it was Flannery O’Connor who said that if you live to be 18, you’ve got enough material to last a lifetime. But I also think it’s true that for whatever reason, those formative years have an outsized presence in my work, whatever my thematic preoccupations are. I feel like everything that I write, at least with regards to fiction, is really just a version of the same story. You’re trying to get that one thing right, you know, and you never quite accomplish it. So it’s nice to be able to stay here. It’s a world that I miss, and it’s a world that I’m comfortable in. As a human being, I like being here.

New York City resident Tobias Carroll is the author of five books, most recently the novel, “In the Sight.” He has reviewed books for The New York Times, Bookforum, the Star Tribune and elsewhere.

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# ART

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more room, it feels not only unnecessary, but also doesn’t do the artists any favors. From the street it looks like a tourist poster gallery, which is a pity because it is filled with marvelous work. I hope that as the MMPA matures, the powers that be here will finally learn that more is not always more.

## DOWLING WALSH

“Richard Estes: Woods and Waters,” through Aug. 1, 357 Main St., Rockland, [dowlingwalsh.com](http://dowlingwalsh.com). For more, call 207-596-0084

Have you ever really looked closely at

a Richard Estes painting? I guarantee you that it is one of the most startling art-viewing experiences you can have. Estes is a legend: father of the Photo Realism movement, a master of observational detail, a peerless interpreter of reflective surface and, nearing 95, still going strong. Fortunately you have the rare opportunity this summer to view this great artist’s work here and also at Schoelkopf, Estes’s New York gallery, which is presenting another solo show “Richard Estes: My Camera Is My Sketchbook” through Aug. 21.

The Rockland show presents meticulously rendered views of Acadia National Park (woods) and Lake Champlain (water). All lead a double life. That is, they are one thing when viewed from a

few feet away — appearing as precise as the photographs he takes of the images he will paint, often taken from multiple angles — and quite another thing when viewed up close (that is, veritably painterly). It is miraculous enough to see “Lake Champlain VIII” [sic] of 1996 from afar; it’s sea gently rippling from the wake of an unseen boat, the sun glistening on the surface at left, clouds reflected in the mirror-like surface and the shadow cast from the boat in the foreground.

It is altogether astonishing to then move in to find what you had perceived dissipating into brushstrokes, where the opaqueness of the paint seems to deny what you have just understood and almost dissolve it into pure abstrac-

tion. What we think is real is suddenly revealed to be pure illusion.

We can even find the graphite lines of his underlying drawing in “Acadia Park I” of 2020. The moistness of moss is palpable in “Acadia Park VI” (also 2020), and the flinty and dangerously slippery surface of rocks in “The Coastline of Maine” (2006) can make you feel like stopping before walking onto it. Yet with all of these, close scrutiny confounds the image. It’s a spellbinding sensation. Estes is an undisputed master of his craft.

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# OPERA

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“Roméo et Juliette,” which premiered in 1867, for this year’s production (Thursday and July 26). In a recent email interview, she noted how the work has a story with “broad name recognition” and could provide “a wonderful entry point for new audiences.”

In her “search for a visual language,” Vaughn found inspiration in the Japanese arts of animé and manga. She acknowledges her ideas, as brought to life with the contributions of the Opera Maine design team,

## IF YOU GO

**OPERA MAINE’S** “Roméo et Juliette,” Thursday and July 26, Merrill Auditorium, 20 Myrtle St., Portland. Tickets \$35-\$175, free for those 21 and under. For more, go to [operamaine.org](http://operamaine.org)

represent a reimagining of the work which is itself based on Shakespeare’s legendary play. But the opera will, Vaughn maintains, remain “rooted in the traditional Renaissance setting of Shakespeare’s Verona” while “employing bold contemporary theatrical effects and striking visual contrasts to heighten the

story’s emotional intensity.”

The story of ill-fated young lovers thwarted by family rivalries will feature English supertitles translated from the French to add, the director believes, “an invaluable tool for accessibility and audience engagement.”

Israel Gursky will conduct the 49-member orchestra in backing 13 principal singers and a chorus of 28. Members of Portland Ballet will provide dance flourishes choreographed by Vanessa Beyland that will add, Vaughn asserts, “another layer of movement, elegance, and storytelling to the production.”

When asked, Vaughn acknowledged that the Opera is

“proud of our deep roots in Maine.” With that in mind, I posed a few questions to Tyler Putnam, who will take the role of The Duke of Verona, a figure of authority in “Roméo et Juliette.”

A bass-baritone singer, Putnam grew up on Chebeague Island, the son of a lobsterman and a teacher. He attended the island school before moving on to Greely Junior High and Greely High School. He described himself as “a very shy kid” who felt “isolated” on the island. That would change.

His early interest in musical theater broadened into opera singing when he attended

Dartmouth College. He reflected on how his voice teacher Louis Burkot “slowly convinced me over three years of study that I could excel in classical singing if I put my mind to it.” Like many local singers, Putnam also cites legendary Maine teacher Ellen Chickering as important to his development.

Putnam is involved with his wife, opera singer Sarah Nordin, in various theater and music events held on Chebeague. But look for him this month on the mainland in Opera Maine’s “Roméo et Juliette.”

Steve Feeney is a freelance writer who lives in Portland.