

Female painters boldly defy definition in timely show at CMCA

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By Bob Keyes Staff Writer

March 15,
2020



Tracy Miller's painting "Question Mark" is part of "Skirting the Line" at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland. *Photo by John Berens, courtesy of CMCA*

ROCKLAND — Five female artists deliver the light we need in a big way at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Skirting the Line: Painting Between Abstraction and Representation” with Meghan Brady, Inka Essenhigh, Tracy Miller, Anne Neely and Hannah Secord Wade

WHERE: Center for Maine Contemporary Art, 21 Winter St., Rockland

WHEN: Through June 7; reception 5-7 p.m. Saturday; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday to Saturday, noon through 5 p.m. Sunday

ADMISSION: \$8, \$6 for seniors, free 18 and younger

INFORMATION: cmcanow.org or (207) 701-5005

“It does look really cheery, doesn’t it,” said Tracy Miller, one of the artists whose work is featured in “Skirting the Line: Painting Between Abstraction and Representation.” The artists fill the gallery with mostly large energetic paintings that infuse the space with wonder, curiosity and joy.

“There is a lot of color,” said CMCA’s associate curator, Bethany Engstrom, pausing as she hung the show last week. “It looks and feels like spring.”

In addition to those of Miller, who has won a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, three Pollock-Krasner Awards and an American Academy of Arts and Letters purchase prize, the exhibition includes the paintings of Meghan Brady, Inka Essenhigh, Anne Neely and Hannah Secord Wade, established artists with careers that include museum and gallery exhibitions in Maine, across the country and internationally. Some live in Maine year-round, others part-time.

The show was organized in conjunction with Women’s History Month and coincides with another female-focused exhibition at CMCA. Erin Johnson’s “Unnamed for Decades” spans two galleries with three video installations and opens Saturday. Johnson won a recent Ellis-Beauregard Foundation fellowship, which comes with a show at CMCA.

CMCA’s focus on women is part of a national trend tied to this year’s centennial of women’s suffrage. Museums across the country are planning exhibitions that focus on women, and others are focusing their collecting efforts on female artists. Elsewhere in Rockland, the Farnsworth Art Museum will honor 13 “Women of Vision” as the 2020 Maine in America recipients, a summer celebration on July 17. The awardees are Lucy Copeland Farnsworth, Berenice Abbott, Linda Bean, Katherine Bradford, Edith R. Dixon, Cig Harvey, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Louise Nevelson, Elizabeth Noyce, Molly Neptune Parker, Maureen Rothschild, Phyllis Mills Wyeth and Marguerite Thomas Zorach.

“Skirting the Line” is open through June 7, with a reception from 5 to 7 p.m. Saturday. It’s an exhibition of strong painters, responding to their times and instincts, as human beings and as artists. Because of that, the exhibition bodes well for gallery visitors seeking to shake the monotony of a gray winter – or the coronavirus blues.

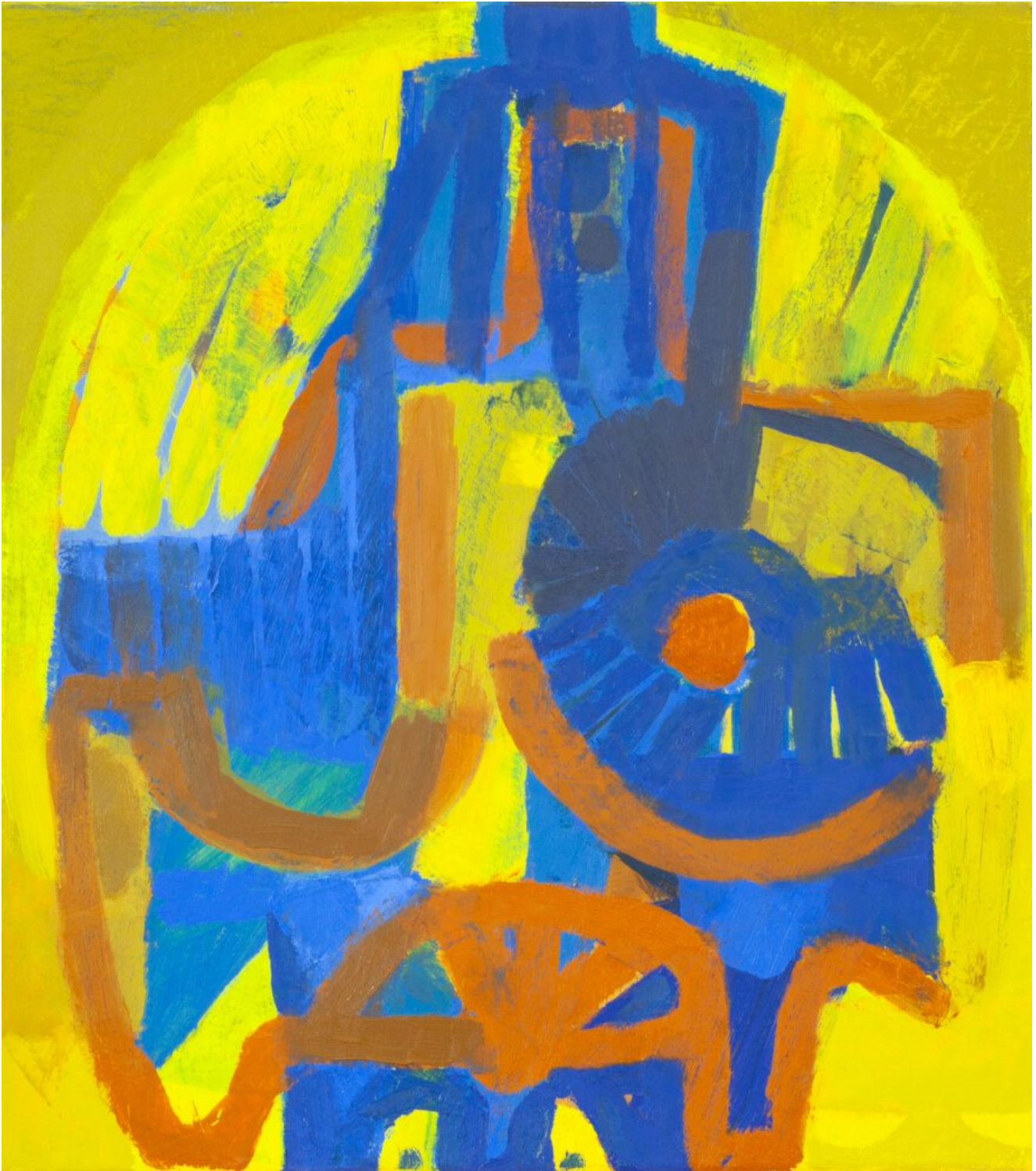
This show feels healthy and alive.

“I work in direct opposition to angst,” said Brady, who in addition to a series of smaller works is showing a wall-size paper mural of abstract shapes in orange, yellow and pink. It’s visible from the gallery’s exterior and feels a little like a beam of sunshine. “I feel the angst just as everyone else does, but I make a conscious effort to come out on the brighter end of things. Dark and brooding is not my mode.

“I feel lucky to do what I do, and I want that to be evident in the work itself.”

Color is the coincidence of this gathering. The common theme that brings these artists together is their willingness to make art that hovers on the line between abstraction and representation, as they explore landscape, still life and figurative subjects.

Brady has been navigating the line since her understudy days at Smith College and graduate work at Boston University, where she felt she had to choose one side of the line or the other. “But I think now it is more open. While I am working, I don’t think, ‘Oh, this is abstract,’ or ‘This is representational.’ I think that’s a simple-minded way to think about painting. It’s so much more open. There are so many more voices and so much more cacophony,” she said.



"Honeycrop" by Meghan Brady features strong lines and blocks of color, on view at CMCA in Rockland.
Image courtesy of CMCA

Brady makes her marks with sweeping gestures and blocks of color, clearly defined. She is showing mostly smaller paintings in Rockland because her larger works are committed to a gallery show at Mrs. in New York, a gallery under the purview of Sara Marie Salamone and Tyler Lafreniere, who spend their summers in Maine. When Engstrom offered the chance to make a large paper painting to hang near the front entry, Brady accepted the challenge.

"It's different material and different skills, but it feels like the same body of work. It all feels connected to me," Brady said. "The paper pieces comes out of my very recent paintings, which are going to New York. They are the same shapes and gestures and language, but on a much larger scale. But they're all connected to the smaller paintings."

Brady sees her paintings as an extension of her own body, and Wade said much the same thing. "When I was younger I used to paint small. But I have reached a different phase," said Wade, who lives in Woolwich.



"Everything All Together" by Hannah Wade. *Image courtesy of CMCA*

Wade's work in Rockland is as large as 4-by-5 feet. She likes the ability to expand her brush work and the freedom to make wider, looser moves. "It opens up the painting to not being so precise and being more physical. I'm 5'3", so the width is about how much I can hold in my arms. In a way, I relate some of these paintings to the size of my body."

She has skirted the line of realism and abstraction for five or six years. She describes her paintings "as representation being eaten by abstraction." She hoards and collects images of landscapes elements – trees, pieces of fruit – and assembles them, removes them and rebuilds them with layers of paint. She produces each painting as a shifting construction of imagery.

Wade is honored to show at CMCA. She grew up on a farm in Unity and began volunteering at age 16 at the old CMCA in Rockport. She has since moved away – to school in western Massachusetts, to San Francisco, London, New York and back to Maine five years ago, to a house in Woolwich. "I feel a connection to CMCA from when I was really just a kid and admiring their program. It's nice to move away, come back and be a part of it in the new building," she said.



"Cipher 14X111" is a personal narrative, told by Anne Neely and on view at CMCA in Rockland with work by four other women artists who work in an area between abstraction and realism. *Image courtesy of CMCA*

Neely, who splits her time between Boston and Jonesport, has spent much of her recent career focusing on "Water Stories," an ongoing exploration about water and climate change. She showed that work at the Museum of Science in Boston, and also recently exhibited at Cove Street Arts in Portland.

She sees her abstract paintings as internal landscapes. They're narratives of specific times and places in her life, and reflect her taking stock as she ages. "I was so busy moving forward with my life I did not focus on the stories of my life in the past, until I got to a certain moment and said, 'Look what's behind me.'"

That was in 2016, when the random image framed by paint stirrers arranged on her palette caught her attention and reminded her of a self-portrait. "It looked like a figure hiding behind colorful sticks, and I realized it was me," she said.

"From that moment on, the stories bubbled up. I had to stop painting about water issues and focusing on environmental issues, which have been present in my life for 30 years, and begin paying attention to these other stories that were bubbling up. They were not accessible to me in words. The only language I had to express them was with my mark-making, my painting. I just let them come out."

Like the other women, she's not concerned if her paintings are seen as representational or abstract, as long as they are seen as honest. Her work has evolved over 40 years, from representational roots "to an ever gradual evolution into wonder and imagination."



Inka Essenhigh makes sensual, dreamlike paintings. Shown here is "The Blazing World." *Image courtesy of CMCA*

Essenhigh, who lives in New York and St. George and whose art is collected by museums in New York and London, tells her stories in richly colored paintings that exist somewhere between fables, nightmares and soothing dreams.

Taken together, these are the stories of our time, Engstrom said, told by cohesive voices with wisdom, insight and the reflection of time.

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