

VALLEY NEWS

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Art of New Hampshire

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When I scan the small sea of information about art that crosses my desk, I keep an eye out for titles that suggest curatorial ambition.

For example, I'm less likely to go see a show titled "New Hampshire Beautiful" than I am to go see, say, "New Hampshire Reimagined," or even "New Hampshire Wasteland." Art is about seeing and I can see the hills and woods from the interstates, thank you very much. Show me the old farm dumps in the valleys, a slick of oil on the water or the crumbling stump of a smokestack, things I'm likely to miss.

So when Plymouth State University sent out a card for its exhibition of "New Hampshire Painting in the 21st Century," the title alone, the lofty objective it promised, lured me up to Plymouth.

It's always good to see a museum or art gallery asking such a big question as "what constitutes New Hampshire painting today." Those questions don't bubble up from the art-viewing public, but curators, academicians and critics should be asking them for the public's benefit.

These questions are asked quite rarely, and when a gallery has the courage to pose them, it ought to follow through and provide some answers. Showing the art is important, but the venue has to come up with something to say about the moment, a summary that gives the viewer some context and history.

While "New Hampshire Painting in the 21st Century" contains some stellar work and provides a survey of painting across the state, it fails utterly to teach us about how the painters in the exhibition view their work. Heck, the exhibition catalog doesn't even tell us where the painters are from, and the hall at Plymouth State's Silver Cultural Arts Center, where the exhibition is on display through Aug. 12, is likewise devoid of information about the artists.

The shame of this is all the greater because some of the work is so good that it made me want to know more about the painters and their histories.

Mutiny, Joseph Blajda's giant oil painting, depicts four stuffed animals gathered in a conspiratorial huddle. They are lit from below, as if one of them has turned on a flashlight, and the surrounding space is pitch black. The scale -- the canvas is nearly four feet tall and more than five feet wide -- the lighting and the way Blajda has grouped the figures form a composition at once menacing and uproarious.

David Raymond's painting, Cow & Ladder, puts the title characters next to each other on a blue background. The cow gazes not at the ladder but at us. We humans put it there, after all, and if anyone is going to answer its mute question or lead it away, it's us. Work by Craig Hood and Melvin Zabarsky also stand out, as do two small mixed-media collages by Carol Gove.

Keep an eye out, too, for work by Colleen Randall, a Dartmouth professor, John and Kathy Bott, who teach at Colby-Sawyer College in New London and Lyme painter Nicola Newton. A painting by longtime Upper Valley resident Bert Yarborough was one of two works included in the exhibition at its initial venue, the Kimball-Jenkins School of Art in Concord, but was left out of the Plymouth State show because of its sexual content.

The exhibit allows us, forces us really, to draw our own conclusions about what constitutes "New Hampshire Painting in the 21st Century," but gives us far too little information to do so.

I called curator Tom Driscoll, a professor at Plymouth State, to ask him about the motivation behind the exhibition.

"I thought it'd be really interesting just to have a sampling of what's going on all over the state," Driscoll said, adding that he was pleased and surprised at the amount of high quality work being produced in New Hampshire. The exhibition could easily have been twice the size, he said.

He also said he saw nothing in the submissions and the resulting exhibition that categorizes New Hampshire painting.