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### **Art review: Incisive photography, empowering beach paintings and rubber works, all in Rockland**

The Center for Maine Contemporary Art and Caldbeck Gallery are home to must-see summer shows.

There's so much art to see on any given day in Rockland that it's hard to decide what to focus on.

The Center for Maine Contemporary Art has a gorgeous show of David Row paintings (through Sept. 12), already perceptively covered by Press Herald arts writer Bob Keyes. It's a highlight of the summer season.

Another exhibition at the CMCA, however, "S.B. Walker!Nor'East" (also through Sept. 12) could hardly be more compelling. And around the corner on Elm Street, at Caldbeck Gallery, is "Katherine Bradford – Dan Dowd," a quirky and intriguing show that might easily be missed for its modest size and second-floor location at the gallery.

#### **CAPTURING THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE**

Sam Walker began traveling around Maine in 2014, when he was 27, photographing what Edward Earle, former curator of collections for the International Center of Photography, refers to in his catalog essay as the "social landscape" of the state. The first thing one realizes making the rounds of the space is that Walker's eye goes way beyond the documentary. He has a sharp, incisive point of view and a gift for poignant ironies inherent in Maine's diverse economic, social and political mix.

Several photos capture the melancholy of old ways of life fading into history. "Family Dollar" announces this by juxtaposing the ubiquitous retail chain's gleaming molded-plastic sign before a sadly rundown rural building with a satellite dish attached to it. The concrete road barriers lined up in front of a weather-beaten church in "Benton" could foreshadow simple road repairs or the building of a new thoroughfare in front (maybe through?) the steepled structure.

But the ones that pop out at us offer a dystopian view of the Pine Tree State's myriad polarities, much in the tradition of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange's photography for the U.S. Department of the Interior's Resettlement Administration during the Great Depression.

Individually, they are quite powerful, perhaps none more than "The Gunsmith, Raymond," a grid of 49 images, all but one showing plastic neon sign boards featuring incendiary slogans: "Government largess is a transfer of working Americans wages to unsalvageable scum," "Spoiled rotten little trust fund strumpets march to murder unborn infants," or "Liberalism like excrement entices vermin."

Another, less politically one-sided image, "Athens," shows a handwritten sign in front of a dilapidated home that reads "The System is the Problem." It's hard to argue with this assessment as the progression of images gathers uncomfortable impact on our trajectory around the gallery. But pulling back and comparing photographs in different parts of the room intensifies the dystopia even more by challenging us to reconcile wildly disparate situations.

How do we make sense of a shot of two boys standing on the front landing of a house in “Monson” – one of Maine’s poorest towns – that looks about to collapse around them and “Cumberland,” with its comfortable house and expansive entertaining deck cantilevered over a bluff above a private child-size train emerging from a tunnel?

Can we find any common ground between the anti-liberal screeds of “The Gunsmith, Raymond” and “Eid Prayer, Portland,” which shows Muslims, heads bowed in worship, on a sacred Islamic feast day, or “The Women’s March, Portland?” One image finds elusive unity in our perpetual human dilemma. It is a sign carved with three simple letters, YMI, titled “Why Am I, Casco.” The show strikingly reveals our innumerable vain attempts to answer this question through startlingly divergent prisms.

### **BRIGHT COLORS, RUBBER ART**

Katherine Bradford is one of Maine’s most well-known and beloved painters. Yet critics seem not quite sure what to do with her. They compare her to Philip Guston. They describe her art as expressionistic, others as a combination of New England romantic realism and subversive abstraction. Some see “utopian collectivity,” others a deconstruction of our hero worship, and still others deeper questioning of sexuality, gender and identity.

That may all be true. But at Caldbeck, her small paintings, all 8-by-10 inches, feel a bit like light summer reading, and not just because most depict pleasures of beach life in Maine. Her figures here are rendered in an even more off-handedly childlike way than her usual style, adding to their sense of innocence.

The color palette is recognizably bright, though many of the works lay the paint on more lightly and breezily so that they come off as fairly flat, rather than emanating the deep luminosity to which most of us have become accustomed.



Katherine Bradford, “Good Morning, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 10 x 8 inches. Photo courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery

Some works imply deeper meanings. The figure of “Strong Woman at Mere Point” holds aloft a large house and the firmament underneath it, and “Good Morning” shows a woman supporting the rising sun. They certainly convey female power – the former brings new meaning to the term “domestic goddess,” the latter apotheosizes women as the eternal, omnipotent force of the universe.

Others also send up the heteronormative ideal by depicting two men holding hands (“Beach Walk, Night”) and more androgynous figures sharing a bed (“Under the Covers”). But the images are primarily delightful. “Coldwater Night Swim,” “Cove Swimmer” and “Beach Fire” all conjure this brief season with joy and fondness, while also telegraphing its fleeting nature. And “Lifeguard Reunion” especially does this with figures whose thin presence makes them appear to be already fading into fall.

Dan Dowd’s wall sculptures are also delightful, but in a much more eccentric way. For years, he has haunted dumps and junk shops collecting the flotsam and jetsam of human life. The strongest works in the show are those that incorporate rubber inner tubes, a material for which he has a palpable affinity. Dowd exploits both the material and sculptural qualities of this object in fascinating ways.

Dowd’s father was a truck driver, so Dowd grew up in constant contact with rubber, either against his skin while floating on inner tubes in the water or against his jackets and coats as he careered down snowy



Dan Dowd, Untitled, 2018, truck tire inner tube rubber, 23 x 20 x 4 inches. Photo courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery

slopes during winter. It's no coincidence, then, that he manipulates rubber in a way that feels corporeal and often mixes them with wool fabrics.

"Hidden Balls" is overtly sexual. Pieces of a snorkel coat wrap the top and bottom of the composition, making the rubber in between feel like skin. The overall impression is of someone caught with his pants down, especially because a threaded metal tube protrudes erect at the center, above two round bumps in the rubber. Your imagination can complete that thought.

In "Crawling," Dowd folds a wool sweater, leaving the four corners loose to simulate an infant's stubby arms and legs. The rolled rubber here, from a truck inner tube, forms a long neck-like element that infers the child's strained effort to move forward.

Dowd's use of discarded garments gives new palpable life to those who formerly wore them by incorporating the stories that reside in the fabric into new narratives. "For George Floyd" employs red velvet to suggest the blood of life and a leather shoe fragment to indicate that life extinguished.

The juxtaposition with Bradford's work was more coincidental than intentional (Dowd and Bradford are friends and live close to each other). But in an oddly curious way, their works and the conversation among them can feel at times alternately playful and serious, flat and three-dimensional, yet unified in the way they point up the ephemerality of everything.