

EXPANDING THE CREATIVE FRONTIER

Jessica Skwire Routhier

"... as the Polar Star has been considered the mariner's guide and director in conducting the ship over the pathless ocean to the desired haven, and as the center of magnetic attraction; as it has been figuratively used to denote the point, to which all affections turn, and as it is here intended to represent the State, it may be considered the citizens' guide, and the object to which the patriot's best exertions should be directed."

—First session of the
Maine State Legislature, 1820

What does it mean to be a leader? This section of the *Maine Women Pioneers III* exhibition—named after Maine's state motto, *Dirigo*, Latin for "I Lead"—attempts to grapple with that question. Worded another way, what does it mean to be a "Woman Pioneer" in the arts? For after all, "leading" is the distinguishing characteristic of a pioneer, defined variously as "one who ventures into unknown territory" or "one who opens up new areas of thought, research, or development." Is a Maine Woman Pioneer in the Arts like the North Star that is pictured on the Great Seal of the State of Maine: a sort of celebrity compass, visible and accessible to all, a "point to which all affections turn?" Or is she like the sailor, pulling inspiration from the state's tide of creativity? Perhaps she is like the farmer with his scythe, patiently

nurturing and then reaping the fruits of her endeavors, or she could be like the pine tree, seemingly limitless in her capacity to renew herself and provide for others.

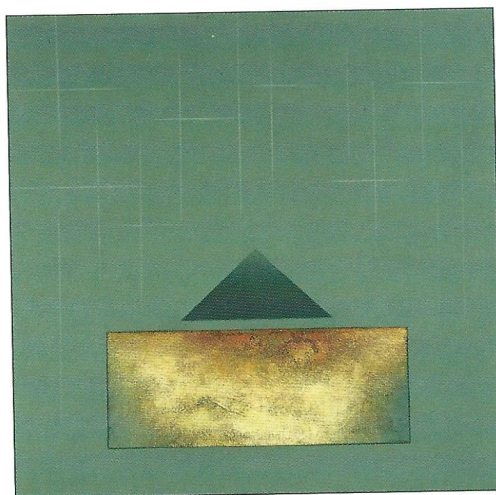
Then again, historically, we're more inclined to view the great artist as something like the solitary and stalwart moose, forging its own way and casting a wide shadow in its path. Indeed, the eighteen artists represented here do loom large in the Maine art scene. They have taught, organized, provoked, innovated, published, and traveled, constantly expanding the boundaries of creative discourse in Maine. Their own art is their frontier, that object to which their best exertions are directed, both inside and outside of the geographical and cultural map of Maine.

Of course, women pioneers have always

had to do more than just settle the wilderness. Art historians like Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock have long observed that women artists have had to stake their claim in the art scene to a degree that men have not. For centuries, restrictions on female behavior meant that

formal artistic study was possible only under unusual circumstances; later, women and girls in art classes were often challenged by institutionalized, sometimes unconscious biases that directed them toward more domestic or commercial outlets for their talents. Even among those who stormed the fine arts scene, there was often a tacit understanding that the most aggressively avant-garde movements of the twentieth century remained the domain of men.

Artists like **Josefina Auslender**, **Noriko Sakanishi**, and **Diane Bowie Zaitlin** have challenged that perception for the last two decades and beyond. Zaitlin's gestural encaustic-and-collage paintings compel the viewer to grapple with materials, surfaces, and technique as forcibly as any Abstract Expressionist work of the postwar era, and Auslender and Sakanishi's architectural, geometric abstractions interpret for a new generation the muscular Minimalism of



Josefina Auslender, *Difuso*

the 1960s and '70s. In Sakanishi's words, "I believe I have, in a sense, led by example as a woman artist working in the area of abstract art. There were very few of us in Maine when I came out of MECA [the Maine College of Art, then the Portland School of Art] in the early 1970s." Auslender

also worked against marginalization politically in her native Argentina, where artists and intellectuals were objects of suspicion during the dictatorial regimes of the 1970s and '80s (she immigrated to Maine in the late 1980s). For their part, Zaitlin and Sakanishi have found that their abstract idioms provide a way to engage disabled students, also so often disenfranchised in the worlds of art and politics.

These artists came of age during an era when feminist art, feminist art history, and art by women were practically synonymous concepts. Groundbreaking treatises like Pollock's *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971) teased out an array of answers to that fundamental question, including the observation that women and their bodies have historically been *subjects* for art rather than its auteurs. Theorist Linda Nochlin cheekily turned the tables with her provocative photograph *Buy My Bananas*—published

in Norma Broude and Mary D. Gerrard's *The Power of Feminist Art* (1972)—a gender-bending and decidedly phallic subversion of a nineteenth-century image of a *demimondaine* with her nude breasts tantalizingly propped up on a tray of luscious-looking apples.

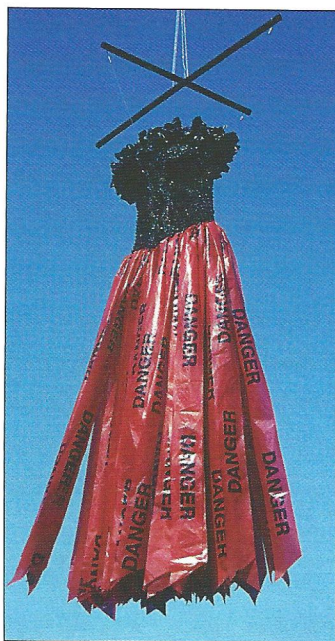
The point of Nochlin's photo was to expose the absurdity of this sexualized gaze when the image-maker is female and the subject male, and for 1972, she made a pretty strong case. However, the last forty years have seen great evolution both in women's art and in gender studies. It seems less strange, now, to see **Denise Froehlich's** frankly sensual, large-format, digital photographs of nude male torsos and pelvises, or **Melonie Bennett's** reconceptualized Madonna and Child (note the cross motifs) in her reverential *Tyler's First Day Home*, in which the father and baby's plump physiques and tonsured pates pleasingly resemble each other. The figures in Bennett's photo inhabit a resolutely male world of wood paneling, motorcycle posters, and sectional sofas; her exploration of it is almost anthropological, as one might respectfully approach a foreign shrine. The male world is also a subject of **Katherine Bradford's** paintings, which deflate myths of patriarchy by positing, for example, an image of two men kissing as an illustration for

the word "MEN," or by showing a pantsless, footless Superman who appears to be washing his "S" badge by the riverbank. Bradford's beleaguered superhero recalls Nochlin's banana-seller, though he is rendered a bit more sympathetically.

Mary Hart and **Elizabeth Cashin McMillan** also explore bodies in their work, though only parts of bodies. The grasping, fumbling fingers and scattered eyes of McMillan's work suggest a dissembled version of that art-historical "gaze," a visual interpretation, perhaps, of the parental admonition to "look with your eyes and not with your hands." Mary Hart's *Gulch* presents a desiccated animal spine and pelvis within a desert-like landscape. "I seek to draw the viewer close," writes Hart, "to create a direct emotional experience of the sensual quality inherent in natural objects." The intimate

close-up of this flesh-colored ravine, bisected by bone, suggests female physicality in a way that is reminiscent of that "Great Woman Artist" Georgia O'Keeffe.

The nature of femininity and the femininity of nature remain topics of interest for Maine women in the arts. **Allison Cooke Brown** and **Katherine Cobey** use traditional female textile arts to explore issues of adornment, protection, vulnerability,

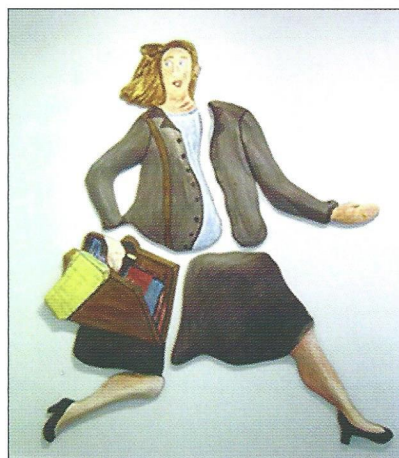


Katherine Cobey, *Danger Dress*

and aging. Textiles are also a point of departure for **Grace DeGennaro's** patterned paintings inspired by nineteenth-century Navajo weavings. "As always," DeGennaro writes, "ritual, growth and the passage of time are the themes." Female creativity and self-adornment as foundations of community are also

subjects of **Barbara Sullivan's** witty fresco *Beauty Shop*. It seems notable that the women's plaster torsos are jaggedly bisected, while their elaborate rolled coiffures are fully intact and visible through transparent hooded dryers.

Sullivan's *Bird Guide*, with its beplumed, chattering denizens, offers a parallel in the animal world. The impossible variety of birds—each an individual shaped fresco affixed to a stand of trees articulated with black Sharpie—recalls the *Peaceable Kingdom* motif of nineteenth-century American art, a pantheistic world in which unlikely animal companions coexist in nature. **Susan Ammons** also uses distinctive materials to delve into the animal world. Her unique form of monumental printmaking, using layered Mylar cut-outs, produces images of waterfowl and other wildlife that are, in her words, "multiple and varied, brilliantly frontal, or receding in space like the animals themselves, a memory, mysterious, and wild by nature."



Barbara Sullivan, *Running Late*

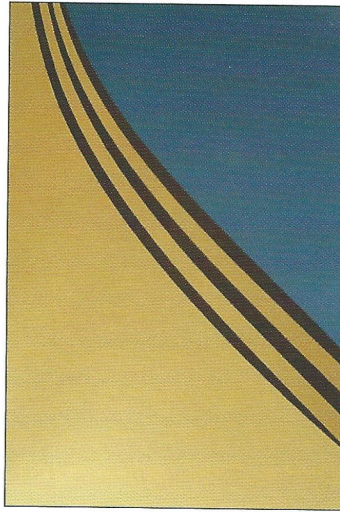
Janice Kasper explores a related idea in her *Shadow Species* series, in which richly colored silhouettes of vanishing Maine species—wolves, bears, frogs—are seen through intricate screens of twigs and leaves. Kasper, who has held artist residencies at two national parks, focuses on environmental concerns

in both her personal and artistic life. As she writes, her work "has consistently been concerned with growing development in New England and especially to the effect of sprawl on our wildlife populations. . . . I hope to make the viewer aware of these changes before permanent harm is done."

Maine has a long tradition of environmental activism, from public figures like Rachel Carson and Edmund Muskie to the quieter, grassroots efforts of back-to-the-landers. **Keliy Anderson-Staley** pulls on the cords connecting Maine politics and nature in her photographic series entitled *Off the Grid*. In these frank color images, Anderson-Staley captures the homes and daily lives of thirty Maine families who have chosen to live unconnected to an electrical grid, a community in which she herself was raised. "I do not want to over-romanticize this way of living or over-estimate the role it might play in resolving the global environmental crisis," she writes, and indeed her photos are candid,

unvarnished and detached. Still, the hand-made, vernacular quality of the homes depicted is undeniably alluring, with the octagonal form of one building strongly echoing the architecture of Revolutionary War forts. **Dozier Bell**, with her painting *Barbican*, also depicts a defensive structure and seems similarly motivated by concerns about humankind's lasting imprint upon the world. The shadowy, ruined battlement seems to exist in a post-apocalyptic landscape, begging the question: What was being defended? And is it still there?

Like all human constructions, art, too, is transient. **Meggan Gould**'s photographs of blackboards, computer desktops, and the back sides of snapshots show, to some degree, what is left behind after the creating is done. **Celeste Roberge** also explores impermanence and futility with her fragile seaweed boats, so delicate as to be transparent, and surely incapable of entering the water without returning immediately to their amorphous, osmotic state. Particularly for an artist like Roberge, who has created permanent, commissioned sculptures for collections from Maine to California, there is an irony in creating art that can so readily un-create itself. The irony is extended in the more solid, bronze versions of these seaweed boats,



Meggan Gould, *Don't Open Box in the Light #14*

which Roberge has pierced with holes so that they, too, can neither hold anything nor float.

Roberge's oarless boats, with their pronounced bowsprits, are timeless and iconic in appearance. They recall the boat in Thomas Cole's famous *Voyage of Life* series from 1842, which carries its passenger through a series of landscapes representing the stages of life. Throughout the four paintings, the passenger receives guidance from an angelic figure—his own North Star or “mariner's guide and director”—but he makes the journey resolutely on his own in his frail little vessel.

Maine's women pioneers in the arts have similarly braved the currents of the state's cultural landscape, holding up a lantern to others who follow in their wake. They lead, more than anything else, by breaking ground in their own artistic pursuits and expanding the creative frontier so that there is always more to explore. They are laborers, leaders, trailblazers: they are pioneers.

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MAINE WOMEN PIONEERS III

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