

**Sacred Heart University**

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**From the Selected Works of Nathan Lewis**

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July, 2012

## Artists Making Their Mark

Fine Art Connoisseur, *Fine Art Connoisseur*



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# Artists Making Their Mark

There is a lot of superb art being made these days; this column shines light on a trio of gifted individuals.



**CONNIE HAYES** (b. 1952) is truly a product of Maine. Born in the town of Gardiner, she grew up enjoying camping trips with her family, adventures that awakened her to both the sublime beauty of Maine's lacy coastline and the quotidian realities of the settlements that punctuate it. After earning a B.A. from the University of Maine, Hayes took a B.F.A. at Portland's Maine College of Art, where she subsequently spent many years teaching and serving as an administrator. In 2005, she and her husband left Portland for Rockland, where they live and work in a 19th-century house built for a sea captain.

It has not always been Maine for Hayes, however. She earned her M.F.A. from Temple University's Tyler School of Art after studying in both Philadelphia and Rome, and she spent five years in New York City painting its buildings and the water towers that crown them. Her interest in these odd forms rather than, say, the Empire State Building,

underscores Hayes' taste for unusual vantages, her Hopper-like knack for approaching a scene from a seemingly unpromising angle that actually sheds more light than any conventionally correct, nostalgic, or touristic view ever could. "When I examine my surroundings," she explains, "I listen for the calling to paint a certain thing. When I find it, it is like a familiar face I recognize. I know it is home, I know it is one of mine."

Hayes is well known in New England, therefore, for insightful scenes of Maine's seaside communities glimpsed from ships, drive-ways, or backyards, or viewed through windows from inside the area's

Connie Hayes (b. 1952)

*Going Out*

2011, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in.

Dowling Walsh Gallery, Rockland, Maine



historic houses. Since 1990, this growing body of work has encompassed her innovative project *Borrowed Views*, through which Hayes is invited to live in someone's home while they are away, painting whatever she chooses. Repaying her hosts only with the opportunity to buy the resulting canvases before anyone else can, Hayes thus experiences different regions of Maine's landscape in new ways, even as she records aspects of the house and its surroundings that are highly personal.

Hayes's hallmarks are powerful strokes of rich color, color that often has little to do with the scene's actual appearance. She says she prefers to "awaken slumbering sensibilities through arresting colors, colors that catch, snag, and attack," but that also never fail to tell us what we need to know about the light and atmosphere that day. Rather than making exhaustive studies, Hayes composes at the canvas: "The paint speaks to me and I go off in unexpected directions. I like surprises." Most of Hayes's mature pictures betray her understandable admiration for Fairfield Porter, with their lush palette and confident brushwork, and for Cézanne, Bonnard, and Vuillard, with their disarming compositions and compressions of space.

On July 6, what seems like an exciting new chapter in Hayes's progress will open at Dowling Walsh Gallery in Rockland, Maine: the exhibition *Abandon, Absorption, and Entrancement* offers 31 recent paintings of people, especially children. The title of Hayes's free illustrated talk on July 17 at Rockland's Strand Theater says it all: "Photography as Sketchbook: Exploring Gesture." A preview of the show suggests that Hayes has indeed been watching closely as the children around her interact with each other and with adults.

Occasionally unnerving but always compellingly composed and expertly crafted, these canvases evoke Porter in a darker mood, the pulsing energy of Eric Fischl's adult scenes, and the not-always-flattering insights delivered by Jack Beal and Alice Neel. Though these were clearly made by the same hand that has given us so many years of landscapes and interiors, there is a different energy here. It will be fascinating to see what Maine's children, and collectors, make of them this summer.

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Hayes is represented by Dowling Walsh Gallery (Rockland). Her show there closes July 29.

**YANA MOVCHAN** (b. 1971) is a conjurer of magic realism. She is best known for fairly large, meticulously detailed paintings that present us with profusions of fruits, flowers, vegetables, and other perishables arranged in and around translucent vessels, among which scamper an array of vaguely unearthly insects, amphibians, birds, and cats. Movchan has also won notice for her impeccably drawn figures, both angelic and earthbound, as well as commissioned portraits of humans and animals.

Born in Kiev, she studied first at the Ukrainian Republican School of the Arts, then earned her B.F.A. and M.F.A. at the National Ukrainian Art Academy, where traditional skills in drawing and painting were still taught. Now based

Yana Movchan (b. 1971)  
*Beside Your Dream*  
 2012, Oil on linen, 30 x 40 in.  
 McCallum Gallery, Toronto

in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Movchan clearly paid close attention to art history during her training. Her most obvious inspiration is, of course, Dutch still life painting of the 17th century, with its almost obsessive details and subtly moralizing fascination with the simultaneous beauty and grotesqueness of natural forms already on their way to decay and death. And Movchan often gives us breathtaking passages of landscape in the distance, drawn directly from Renaissance forerunners both Northern and Italian.

Yet she also pays attention to her own imagination, evincing a sly wit and taste for the hallucinatory that reminds us of the surrealist René Magritte. Whether or not we sense the presence of deeper meanings to be decoded, viewers must relish the painstaking care Movchan has taken with her small brushes. Made slowly, this is art that rewards slow looking, especially at the delicacy of her glazes and knack for catching dewdrops and passing creatures in mid-breath. Seemingly timeless, these pictures were most certainly made in our time, and indeed Movchan clues us in with the occasional acidic tone unavailable before the 20th century, or a nod to the aesthetics of photography with which we all grew up.

Particularly intriguing is the fact that Movchan works in the same province as Alex Colville (b. 1920), Canada's revered master of an airier strain of magic realism. Often compared to Andrew Wyeth, Colville has long made it all right for Canadians, and especially Nova Scotians, to revisit art history and make it their own. Raised in the Ukraine, where history still matters, Movchan has found in Nova Scotia a context ideally suited to her ethos. She knows that life is short, and that art endures, calling her still lifes an expression of "holistic permanence: a complete engagement with what outlasts our human foibles." Long may she paint.

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Movchan is represented by Lily Pad Gallery (Watch Hill, Rhode Island), Lotton Gallery (Chicago), McCallum Gallery (Toronto), and Royal Gallery (Providence).





**NATHAN LEWIS** (b. 1971) tells stories in paint, stories not always legible at first glance. Based in New Haven, Connecticut, and a member of the faculty at Sacred Heart University in nearby Fairfield, Lewis was raised in Sacramento. In his late teens, he headed to St. Petersburg to study art, and then to the Florence Academy of Art. He returned to the U.S. to earn his B.F.A. in drawing and painting at the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts in Old Lyme, Connecticut, followed by an M.F.A. awarded jointly by Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

These diverse educational experiences endowed Lewis with superb draftsmanship and a mastery of values that empower even the most complex composition to convince viewers of its viability. “The illusion kicks up fast, and it makes you feel like light is coming from the brush,” notes the artist, who also clearly learned his art history in school and during his travels. “You have to be aware of the past, and in many ways that’s a burden,” he explains. “But then you have to look through the window of what’s been done and find some way of making it your own.” In July, this awareness will grow keener when Lewis visits Colmar (France) and Ghent (Belgium) to examine their cathedrals’ famous altarpieces with an eye toward creating new paintings inspired by his research.

Lewis makes the past his own through inventive storytelling inspired by voracious reading of authors as diverse as Beckett, Kafka, Calvino, and Crane, not to mention infusions of contemporary rock music and even Gilbert & Sullivan. “Most of my work is narrative — trying to imply meaning or some sort of story,” he says. “Sometimes it’s fairly direct and sometimes it uses symbols.” A suitable example is Lewis’s enormous 2008 canvas *Till We Find the Blessed Isles Where Our Friends Are Dwelling*. Taking its title from Nietzsche, this scene of 17 ethnically diverse Americans frantically paddling their canoe through churning waters was inspired by close inspection of Emmanuel Leutze’s famous *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851). Long interested in the notion of journeys, Lewis seeks to consider here how contemporary Americans’ striving for the promised land differs from, and resembles, that of their 18th-century forerunners.

Lewis is now developing a series of dramatically composed paintings with figures situated in an abandoned factory he has discovered in Connecticut. He explains that he has been sneaking into condemned buildings since boyhood, partly for the thrill and partly because he is fascinated with the sense of history, ruination, and loss they convey. (These same evocations pertain to his fascination with the powerfully twisting branches of an old tree that appears in various pictures.) The factory scenes are both ambiguous, in that we rarely see the protagonists’ faces, and alarming, hinting as they do at the possibility of violence: here a man sharpens his axe, there a woman prepares to fling and ignite kerosene.

Much more than melancholy, Lewis’s scenes successfully convey his “sense of awe, of belonging, of interest, or connection to things one doesn’t understand, or has not defined.” He explains that his “continual return to perceptual painting has a lot to do with trying to go back to that moment of experiencing whatever it was that my eye saw before I named it — with trying to prolong the experience. For example, to face light as an entity, or what something really looks like.” The new pictures compel us to look with him, to puzzle them out and, ultimately, to get involved in them.

Lewis has a busy year ahead. Through July 27, he is participating in the group show *Individual Common* at the Gallery at Constitution Plaza in Hartford, and a solo show of his paintings will run September 1–29 at West Cove Gallery in West Haven. A solo show of drawings is set for August 20–December 17 at Willamette University’s Rogers Gallery in Salem,

Oregon. Longer-term in nature is Lewis’s commission to paint a mural for the student commons building at Sacred Heart University. Inspired by Raphael’s famous *School of Athens* at the Vatican, the artist envisions this as a portrait of the entire university community. We look forward to seeing it in September 2013, its anticipated completion date. [n](#)

Nathan Lewis (b. 1971)

*Orpheus*

2011, Oil on canvas, 62 x 32 in.

Collection of the artist

