

Art review: In two fall exhibits, a painter devastates, a printmaker expands the form

At Aperto Fine Art, Anne Neely's work delivers beauty and foreboding alike, while David Wolfe's prints at Moss Galleries offer inspired innovations.

BY JORGE S. ARANGO



Anne Neely, "O Canada," 2023, oil on linen, 11 x 14 inches Image by Julia Feathergill, courtesy of Aperto

As we transition into a new season, we take a look at a couple of other fresh beginnings on the local art scene.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Anne Neely: Looking Now"

WHERE: Aperto Fine Art, 63 Main St., Bridgton

WHEN: Through Oct. 15

HOURS: Noon to 6 p.m. Thursday and Sunday, noon to 8 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-291-4245, apertofineart.com

WHAT: “David Wolfe: Counterbalance”

WHERE: Moss Galleries, 251 Route 1, Falmouth

WHEN: Through Oct. 15

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-781-2620, elizabethmossgalleries.com

Aperto is a new gallery in Bridgton, showing “Anne Neely: Looking Now” through Oct. 15. And a show at Moss Galleries in Falmouth unveils the new artistic approach of David Wolfe, a master printmaker in Portland who is breaking out of his box with experimentations in mixing techniques of printing and painting in “David Wolfe: Counterbalance” (through Oct. 28).

Aperto Fine Art opened a year ago this May, but it has mostly flown under the radar because of its location away from art loci like Portland and Rockland. It was started by Linda LaCroix, whose brother is the artist Chris Polson. Polson also co-owns a Massachusetts-based company that produced stretcher frames for artists with whom he has longtime professional relationships. LaCroix has been drawing from this pool of talent – which includes Dale Bradley, Brian Krebs and Kathy Moss – for her exhibitions.

There is a kind of beautiful devastation to many of Neely’s paintings. Her surfaces ripple and glisten with textures and multiple painting techniques that immediately seduce us before we have a moment to realize what we are looking at, which turns out to be deadly serious. For example, there is one small oil on linen that could be easily taken as a beautiful autumn abstraction. The bottom boasts lively red, gold and orange brushstrokes. The middle is a vaporous white that initially looks like mist. And at the top is a sky streaked in sunrise or sunset colors.

Then we look at the title and date – “O Canada,” 2023 – and it dawns on us that what we are actually looking at is a scene of forests burning. The mist is actually smoke from the fire, and the sky’s colors are the effect of the sun filtered through toxic fumes and haze. One is reminded of the atmospheric conditions of Edvard Munch’s “Scream,” which scientists have since attributed to the long-distance effects of an Indonesian volcanic eruption on the skies over Scandinavia almost 6,500 miles away. Neely, in other words, is painting – with unquestionable beauty – the

ongoing disaster of wildfires in Canada, which recently sent smoke over the border into northern Maine, causing air quality warnings.



Anne Neely, "What Remains," 2023, oil on linen, 72 x 56 inches Image by Julia Feathergill, courtesy of Aperto

Occasionally Neely is more forthrightly apocalyptic, as in "What Remains," a stunning painting that depicts a desolate, broken landscape under a gorgeously rendered firestorm in the sky. We don't know what happened exactly, but it looks like the aftermath of an explosion, possibly a nuclear one. "From Above" paints a similarly end-of-days picture, the sky raining hot curtains of pinks and reds onto a charred landscape.

But what is extraordinary about both of these works, particularly "From Above," is their tour-de-force painting and exquisite, if devastating, loveliness. Neely seems to be layering diaphanous,

thinned-out paint washes onto her surfaces, spattering flecks of pigment over them and sometimes diluting her pigments so much that they trickle down in delicate capillary networks resembling patterns of crackle or drip glazes on porcelain.



Anne Neely, "From Above," 2023, oil on linen, 60 x 48 inches Image by Julia Feathergill, courtesy of Aperto

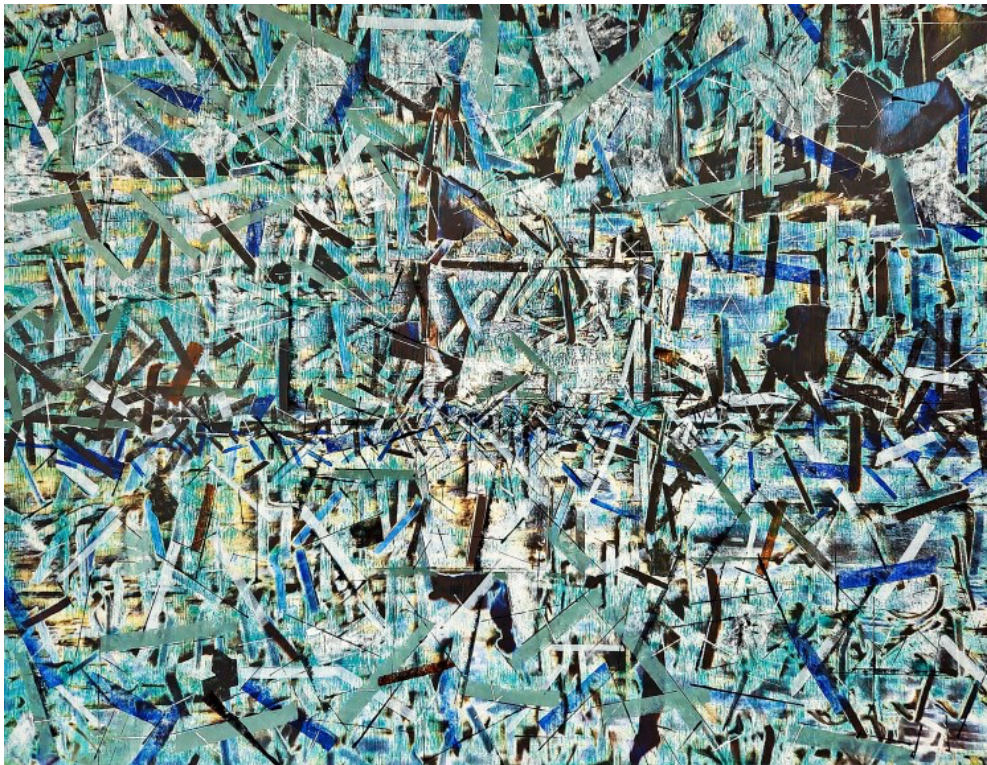
She clearly uses this latter technique in the enormous (56 by 72 inches) "Primal Fire" to render a stand of scorched trees in the foreground. Neely obviously rotated her canvas 90 degrees and made horizontal lines of thinned out paint that dribbled down so that when rotated back again, the original lines form the vertical trunks of the trees and the perpendicular drips approximate branches – all of them incinerated. This alone takes incredible control (she must know how much paint to put on her brush so all the drips are more or less uniform). The trees convey the sense of a scaffold that, like all scaffolds, is inherently precarious and temporary.

As Neely herself told Christopher Crosman, the former executive director of the Farnsworth Art Museum who wrote the fine catalog essay, “I try to find a balance between beauty and foreboding in my work.” With this suite of paintings, Neely accomplishes this masterfully. They are calls to action, however magically, sensually executed.

ART FORMS IN FLUX

Wolfe Editions in Portland is a commercial print shop established in 1998 that produces fine print books, fine art prints and posters. [Its proprietor, David Wolfe](#), is a master printmaker who has collected an array of antique presses: iron hand presses, cylinder presses, etching presses, lithography presses and more.

Perhaps because printing involves creating a complete image on a plate before transferring it to paper, Wolfe found that his recent impulse to paint was unexpectedly daunted by the naked possibilities offered by an actual blank sheet of white paper. His solution was to begin with a print of something, often a photograph, then build upon it with paint and other printing tools and techniques, sometimes completely obscuring the initial image (though we can often still sense the life of it under his painted marks).

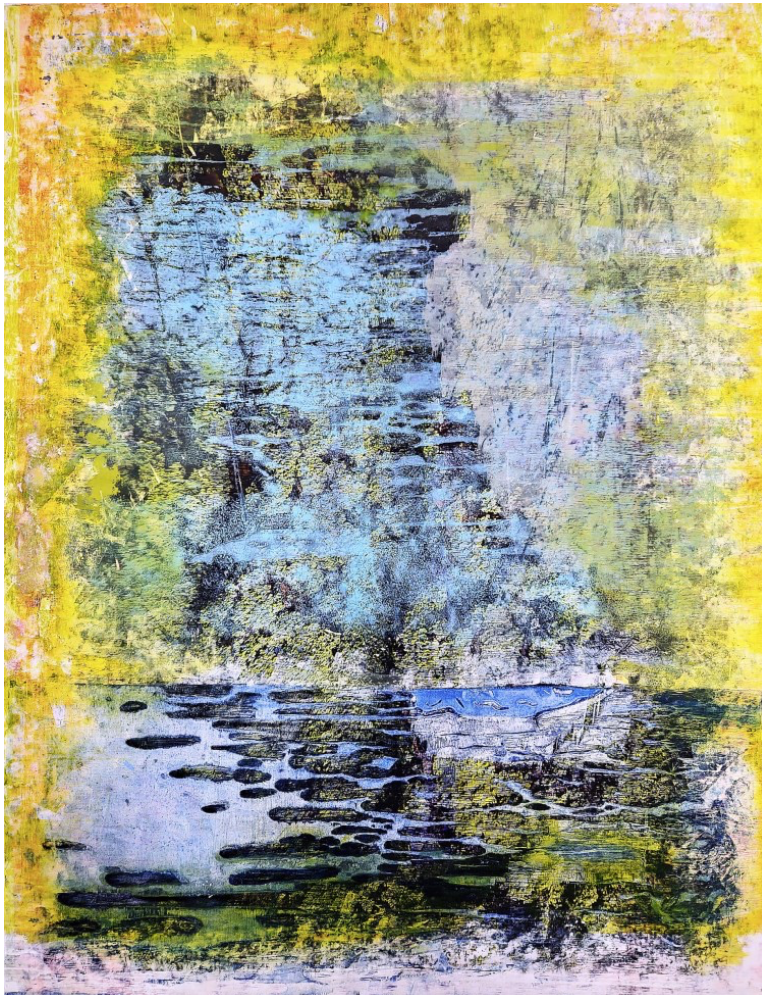


David Wolfe, “Thunder and Lightning” Photo courtesy of the artist

Sometimes the initial image is completely obscured, as with “Thunder and Lightning,” which started life as a closeup shot of a telephone pole covered in rusted staples left over from posting hand bills. Like most printmakers, texture is of vital interest to Wolfe, so he began layering texture over the picture using a woodcut block to print blue and green wood grain patterning over the pole, partially obfuscating the original shot.

On top of this, Wolfe used brushes and various printing tools to make lines inspired by the staples in brown, black, green and blue acrylic paints. The density of marks confuses what we’re looking at, though if you peer closely you can decipher which lines are the actual staples of the photo and which are painted. The result looks, especially without prior knowledge of his process, like an abstract expressionist painting.

Many of these works use the same principle, varying the degree of obscuration. The most successful ones, in my opinion, are those where we can decipher, to greater or lesser extent, the different layers of Wolfe’s process.



David Wolfe, “Canadian Beauty” Photo courtesy of the artist

My favorite is “Canadian Beauty,” its base image a digital print of lichen. A little more than a quarter of the bottom received a woodcut print overlay of what recalls rocks breaking the surface of a lake or brook (we see Wolfe’s use of the same woodcut in the nearby “Night and Day”). It looks as if the area above this might be another woodcut of scratched, scored and gouged lines. Over it all, Wolfe applied acrylic and oil paints in pinks, blues and yellows, the colors bleeding into or through each other.

The final picture looks like we are viewing a body of water that moves out to a horizon line, but glimpsing it through a haze of various colors. This gives it the dreamy sense of memory of old, scratchy celluloid images or muddy daguerreotypes.

It’s intriguing to try figuring out what the anchoring starter image is and how Wolfe has progressively complicated our perception of it. But this new hybrid form of printing-painting also has compositional interest that can allude abstractly to specific things or, like “Thunder and Lightning” or “White Heat,” reference a general idea that is less obvious to the viewer.



David Wolfe, “House Where Nobody Lives” Photo courtesy of the artist

In his quest for innovation and experimentation, Wolfe can also have the occasional misfire. “House Where Nobody Lives,” for example, uses these same techniques and tools to produce an image that looks pretty commercial. At other times, he incorporates a printing plate in the overall

composition (“Mother”) or presents the carved woodcut itself as a sculptural two-dimensional work (“Back to Black”).

The former looks like an interesting but not especially attractive piece of optical art, with overlaps of color that can feel muddy and not completely resolved. The latter feels too obviously itself, which is to say a tool made to create other images, thus denying it a sense of a fully conceived wall sculpture.

The more I looked at it, the more I perceived “Back to Black” as a kind of folk art object rather than a two-dimensional painting or sculpture. However, the artist Daniel Minter, with whom I chatted as we both took it in, countered my argument by saying that “the block itself is the thing” and the prints resulting from it were of less interest to an artist. Which just goes to show how art is ultimately and always subjective.

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