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Fog or Lost Souls (2012) by Natasha Mayers

Art Agitators

Stir it up: Social **activism** thrives in Maine's fine art world.

BY DANIEL KANY

WHEN GOVERNOR LEPAGE seized Judy Taylor's largely federally funded "History of Maine Labor" mural from its spot in the Department of Labor in 2011, artist and activist Robert Shetterly and his Union of Maine Visual Artists colleagues mustered more than 400 concerned persons to a press conference at the art-denuded office. The great African American artist David Driskell was this year's honoree at the Colby College Museum of Art's annual Summer Luncheon. A crowd of hundreds gave him a standing ovation for his speech about art of the African diaspora, the work he makes in his Falmouth studio, and his own story of growing up poor and black in the South. Meanwhile, current artists like Pigeon have grabbed attention with a series of wheatpaste-posted prints featuring the

bold label "MAINER" under images of real Mainers—black, Latino, female, gritty, gay, and otherwise. The arresting images were seen by tens of thousands on the Congress Street columns of Maine Historical Society, among other places. Jay York's photo series "Jay's Morning Walk" chronicles the photographer's daily observations of city life on film. His lens casts an unflinching eye on discarded syringes and uncomfortable scenes of the previous night's hedonism on Portland streets in the stark light of day. These images appear on hundreds of local Facebook feeds day-after-day (including mine), like a calendar drumbeat.

Everywhere, it seems, we are seeing Maine artists dedicated to stirring social engagement.

In fact, well before Trump, art in Maine passed an invisible threshold. While the

Live Wires

★ NATASHA MAYERS ★



BUSTED: Natasha Mayers is arrested for an act of non-violent civil disobedience at the launch of a Bath Iron Works destroyer on April 1, 2017.

Natasha Mayers is a painter and activist whose 2016 solo exhibition "suits" at the Maine Jewish Museum took an old-school liberal approach to economic justice, portraying Wall Street's members, or "suits," as

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cultural landscape had long been dominated by traditional arts, the scales have tipped towards more contemporary modes. Maybe it's the modernist roots of Maine's traditional art? After all, the Impressionists, Winslow Homer, and even the practice of plein-air painting are all radical and revolutionary by nature.

Because it's our norm, American culture may be hard for us to see. But to the world, America represents the possibility and potential of societal revolution. We are the proof a society can overthrow powerful oppressors to create its culture anew according to its own values.

In oppressive regimes, the incendiary power of culture is well known. After Malevich and his colleagues of the Russian avant-garde helped lead the effort to remove the Czar, the Soviets outlawed abstraction—even though black square painter Malevich was the first cultural minister of the revolution. Hitler also took the threat of abstract painting seriously and forcibly seized what he labeled “*entartete kunst*”—degenerate art.

Art, in other words, has long been known to stir social engagement—and powerfully. We should also remember that while we largely associate Maine-connected modernists like Edward Hopper, Robert Henri, George Bellows, and Rockwell Kent with painterly appeal, they were seen in their time as politically-charged social realists. Henri, Bellows, and Hopper were members of the rebellious Ashcan School movement. We know this, but we have forgotten how to connect that to the Maine side of their work.

With fewer leading galleries but plenty of expansion among museums and non-profit venues, Portland's art scene has changed. Social media is now a massive engine for the dissemination of cultural efforts. But as the venues have changed, so have the media. Installation, video, performance, photography, and various multimedia offerings now appear to outnumber painting in terms of audience and local offerings.

While offhand I could list dozens of regional artists whose work is primarily driven by social content, I recently spoke to a few who represent the range and reality of Maine artists who dare to disturb, incite, and stir social engagement.



“I’m sometimes making nasty jokes about a nasty world.”

(Natasha Mayers, continued from first page)
a sickness, an infection within our culture, appearing everywhere in painterly references to masterpieces, styles, places, and ideas.

What's the social content of your work?

I question power and the social order. I'm interested in power differentials—the hidden mechanisms that control how wealth is distributed. This was my theme for the “suits” series. The “suits” neutralize the individual, depersonalize the role. Even the people who wear the suits are disempowered [sometimes], as they too are caught in and chewed up by the system they pretend to control.

Is art an effective tool for social change?

Yes, of course! The most important work I do now is with the Artists' Rapid Response

Team (ARRT!), a project of the Union of Maine Visual Artists. I also work with the disenfranchised and those in the mental health system. I help those people find their voices, to tap into their full range of expression. In collectively creating protest banners, ARRT! also helps marginalized groups to amplify their voices and be heard. It's important to me that I am unafraid to address social issues directly in my work.

What's the relationship you see between your audience and the content of your work?

I'm sometimes making nasty jokes about a nasty world. I'm talking about the most serious things with a touch of irony, humor, pattern, exuberant color, eccentric configurations. It may be simultaneously seen as a cry of joy and a cry of rage—a damning cri-



Rollover (2014) featured in "Men in Suits: Paintings by Natasha Mayers," an exhibition at the Maine Jewish Museum in Portland in 2015.

tique of our government's policies, but also an artist's coping mechanism for living with the onslaught of depressing news. My challenge is to make a symbolic image that expresses both personal and universal feelings, to avoid clichés, to get under your skin, and not turn you off. To help you connect the dots between events and issues.

Art can help you feel your feelings when things are scary. It allows us to reflect on who we are and what we're doing as a nation. When you view my work, I hope you'll get more in touch with your unease about what's going on and sense the emergency and the madness of it. Grief can open the heart to courage and compassion, and outrage can move you to an active and moral response.

Denise Levertov articulated this idea in the introduction to her poetry anthology, *Making Peace*: "A poetry articulating the dreads and horrors of our time is necessary in order to make readers understand what is happening, really understand it, not just know about it but feel it."

★ DANIEL MINTER ★

Daniel Minter is a painter who has never shied away from difficult subject matter. Take, for example, the ghastly history of Malaga—a coastal Maine island that was home to a mixed-race fishing village. In 1912, the state purchased the island, forced the inhabitants to leave, seized mixed-race children from their families, and even exhumed the bodies from the local cemetery (See our story, "Shudder Island," October 2004). This shameful slice of history was brought to life by Minter through a series of paintings of the island's former inhabitants. In 2012, "A Shallow Home" went on exhibition at the Soren Christensen Gallery in New Orleans.

Earlier this year, Daniel Minter organized an exhibition entitled "A Distant Holla" at Portland's Abyssinian Meeting House. Built in 1828 by free blacks, Portland's Abyssinian Meeting House is the third oldest African American meeting house in America. Minter's highly attended exhibition and performances celebrated the driving power of the Abyssinian Meeting House and its attending black communities as facets of local society

and culture. The show featured works by David Driskell, Lebanese artist Elizabeth Jabar, Haitian-American Rafael Clariot, Ebeneza Akapko, Titi de Baccarat, and Hi Tiger frontman Derek Jackson. Following its opening, "A Distant Holla" was lauded as "a deeply spiritual show on hallowed ground" by the *Portland Press Herald*.

From painting exhibitions to performances, Minter is a leading community figure who, despite his broad-tent appeal, engages with an outspoken edge. He was one of the few local figures who spoke out publicly on social media in support of British artist Hannah Black's criticisms of Dana Schutz's contentious painting of Emmett Till in this year's Whitney Biennial. While Minter's work often features uncomfortable truths, he presents past difficulties in the light of spiritual healing rather than bitter shadows. Outrage, his toughest works remind us, can and *should* motivate us all to be better people. Outrage is a tool for guiding the future away from past wrongs.



A Distant Holla (2017) by Daniel Minter

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★ JAN PIRIBECK ★

Jan Piribeck is a professor at USM, where she helped establish the digital art program. Her art takes its lead from geographic information science and specifically seeks to engage the community about the effects and echoes of sea level change.

What social goals are you trying to reach with your art? Society would be much healthier if it didn't ignore environmental change. I'm trying to accomplish the goal of informing people about sea level rise using art as a medium of communication and expression. My vision is for artists, community members, entrepreneurs, city planners, and government officials to work together toward "no regrets" decisions that impact the long-term future of the environment.

Generally, what is your work about?

The subject matter of my work is sea level change, which I think of as a metaphor for change in general.

Jan Piribeck installs *Blue Wrap Wave*, a collaborative project done with Christopher Wright as part of 'Meeting Place East Bayside,' a project of **Art At Work**, The City of Portland, and the East Bayside Neighborhood Organization.



Is art an effective tool for social change?

Of course! Some artists believe social content corrupts the purity of aesthetics, but as Laurie Anderson said, quoting Lenin, "Ethics is the aesthetics of the future." That future has arrived.

Tell me about your work's social engagement?

I'm the founder of an artist collective called the King Tide Party. King Tides are the highest tides of the year, and they pose a frightening reality to the future of Casco Bay. We're a collective of socially engaged artists whose

mission is to develop new and imaginative ways of communicating the reality of sea level rise. We'll make something, a sculptural object, a reading—a process in which people participate by writing something and reading it in public. The process will punctuate and embed into the memory of the people who participate.

How do your social or political goals relate to the object-nature of art?

I believe in the well crafted idea. I believe in letting the idea take form. For me, that's generally installation, prints, and a process of digital journaling.



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Jamie Wyeth. Red Tailed Hawk. mixed media, 15" x 15," original, signed lower left

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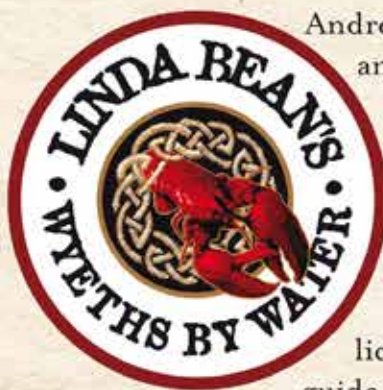
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★ DAN MILLS ★

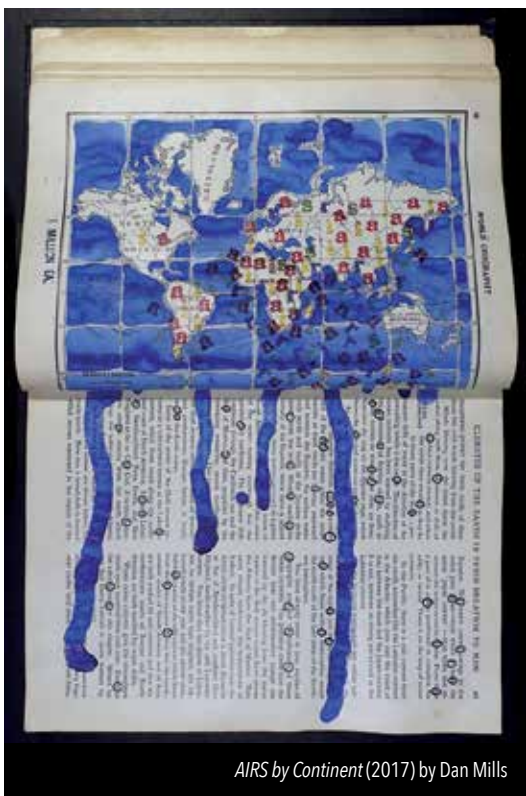
Dan Mills is both a painter and the Director of the Bates Museum of Art. His work, which has been exhibited in leading galleries in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, ranges from parody videos of Donald Trump to large-scale paintings on maps that use nuanced visual systems to redirect and provoke deeper understanding of demographic and map-related data. His 2011 map series, "Future States of America," in-

"There's a lot of suffering due to conflicts in our world. But how much? Due to how many current wars and conflicts?" I didn't know, so I went looking for answers."

vestigates the CIA's imperialist playbook for American conquest possibilities. Among his socially-engaged artistic production, however, we should include his curatorial activities. Mills hosted the first curated exhibition of Saudi contemporary art in New England at Bates, "Phantom Punch: Contemporary Art from Saudi Arabia in Lewiston." Referencing the infamous 1965 knock-out boxing match between Muhammed Ali and Sonny Liston, the show aimed to "create a timely cross-cultural dialogue on campus and in the surrounding communities."

What role do you see art playing in local, state and/or national culture?

Art is part of culture. I don't prescribe a



AIRS by Continent (2017) by Dan Mills

specific role but recognize that art, the arts, are inextricably woven into culture.

Is art an effective tool for social change?

Yes, but it's only one facet or tool. Unless the art rises to being culturally embraced beyond the art world and covered in the media, it's scope is limited. Our society sometimes has a way of diminishing the arts and their importance. However, more people attend museums than professional sports events and theme parks combined, with over 850 million visitors each year to American museums, according to the American Alliance of Museums.

What do you think is the most important social content that now appears in Maine art?

I think it's the breadth of the art being made here in terms of subject, concepts, and disciplines.

Tell us about your latest project.

My 2015 series, "Current Wars and Conflicts," started with the thought: "There's a lot of suffering due to conflicts in our world. But how much? Due to how many current wars and conflicts?" I didn't know, so I went looking for answers. After doing some research, I created over 40 works that visualize the information on maps, atlas pages, children's geographies, and drawings. ■

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