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Art review: Exhibit explores Thoreau's relationship with Maine

'We might climb a tree, at least' is on view at USM's Maine Museum of Photographic Arts.

By Daniel Kany on November 12, 2017

In 1961, Piero Manzoni created a notorious work of art, in which he labeled 90 t in cans as though each was filled with 30 grams of an artist's feces.

My art history professor at Bowdoin College, Larry Lutchmansingh, was telling my class about this – a bit miffed,

as far as I could tell – when one of my classmates raised his hand and, practically shouting, interrupted, "My parents just bought the last one!"

ART REVIEW

WHAT: "We Might Climb a Tree, at Least" – An exhibition to celebrate the genius of Henry David Thoreau

WHERE: Maine Museum of Photographic Arts, University of Southern Maine Glickman Family Library, 314 Forest Ave., Portland

WHEN: 7:45 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 7:45 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday; through Jan. 27

HOW MUCH: Free

INFO: 780-4270, usm.maine.edu/library

Lutchmansingh, deep-voiced and ever deeply sober in his tone, changed tack. He had planned on talking about how artists so often mocked their supporters, but he switched his perspective to how collectors – art consumers – were so often willing to play along with the critical jests so many artists seemingly foisted on their supporters.

If there was one person I had ever met in my life who would not pander to a wealthy collector (or his kin), it was Professor Lutchmansingh. He was a moral giant, a philosopher in the highest sense of the word. So, to say the least, I was perplexed. I had to wrap my head around the idea that Manzoni could mock his audience in the basest terms possible and that a philanthropist could embrace this – even fiscally – and not be pissed.

Carly Glovinski made herself known to me by being included in a Portland Museum of Art biennial. She made drawings of cheeseburger wrappers on tracing paper that she then crumpled up and tossed in the corner of the PMA. We were supposed to think the joke was on us – the viewers – but Glovinski insisted that the wrappers not be cordoned off. Little old ladies, apparently, snatched up the wrappers when the ostensibly attentive guards looked away. They didn't want to offend the poor guards for not doing their jobs after all. No, the joke wasn't on the viewer, but the institution beset with safeguarding the watercolors – which looked, not by happenstance, so much like crumpled up burger wrappings. Garbage. Refuse.

Glovinski has more recently worked with the York Public Library to give us fake books that visitors to the library could find on the shelves using old-school cards in the traditional library systems. The installation, which has been extended through Nov. 30, leaves us wondering about the ramifications of her work – echoes of possibilities: Can we check those fake books out? Can we take her works of art home? Can we, unlike most works of art, handle them in the library like we could any other object on the shelves?

At the University of Southern Maine's Glickman Library, the Maine Museum of Photographic Arts has recently mounted an exhibition of works geared toward reconsidering philosopher Henry David Thoreau's vision of Maine. Called "We Might Climb a Tree, at Least," the exhibition includes works by artists who present notions of what the philosopher may have found compelling about Maine, an almost indescribably inaccessible and beautiful place. He called Maine "stern and savage" but in 1864 published "The Maine Woods." He first explored the interior of Maine in 1846, then went with two Penobscots, Joseph Attean and Joe Polis, on expeditions in 1853 and 1857.

And yet, as artist Dan Mills reveals, Thoreau's traipsings through Maine comprised merely a bit of the common Wabanaki paths in what was to become an American state about 200 years ago. (Personally, I find Maine's birth troubling: We were born of a slavery deal involving Missouri.)

Mills' maps don't make the point directly about the Missouri Compromise, but they offer a shape – an oval with line through it, not unlike a closed eye – that accurately reflects Thoreau's ostensibly impressive meanderings through Maine. Tacitly, however, Mills makes it clear the expertise lies elsewhere – as in, with the Wabanaki, whose story we do not so directly have in hand.

“We might climb a tree” is a beautiful show, led by the exquisitely grainy print-specific black and white photos of Elizabeth Greenberg and the face-mounted dye-sublimation prints of Sarah Szwajkos that, however slick, offer a well-crafted ethic in support of the Maine landscape they obviously adore.

But Mills’ images go off like a bomb. The small-handed notion is to imagine Mills’ works take down Thoreau, but they don’t: Mills forces us to want the Wabanaki expertise. And this means everything. We learn from him something was never at our fingertips before.

Glovinski, too, forces us to question our data sources just as she smoothly delivers a reminder about our cosmologies. Her book choices, however fake as objects, echo our philosophical concerns by leaning to the most obvious topics life has to offer. (In fact, she has a thing for the “Life” series of books, about the universe, earth, etc; her reasons for using these run from humorous to a prickly response to the notion of all-encompassing information authority.)

Thoreau might have had us climb a tree, but our artists want so much more for us. Glovinski and Mills, among so many other regional artists, want us to think hard, to the point of philosophy, about why and how we exist. They acknowledge the long-existing problem of “fake news.” And they remind us that art can help us address the questions of place, identity, ethics and truth.

Years later, we may hear that Manzoni’s fecal cans might contain plaster instead of actual artist poop – which is now the word on the street – and yet we can find this now humorous, even a relief. It’s the fiction, after all, the play, that makes art so interesting. Like movies or theater, it was never about the fact, but the story. Even the story of Thoreau, and where he went in Maine. After all, if we wanted the real map – the real story – we would be chasing down the Wabanaki, the locals, whose real narrative is far beyond what we can stuff into our artists’ cans or library cards. Well, that is, unless we change our story.

Changing stories, though, may not be so easy or fun, but it’s what great artists like Mills and Glovinski compel us to do, whether we want to or not.