

Decor Maine

John Moore: Poetry of Place

Layering memory and observation, artist John Moore paints evocative new realities in his Belfast studio.

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Artist John Moore came to Maine to teach at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in the summers of 1974 and 1980 and “loved Maine so much” that when he was invited back to teach again in 1984, he used that summer’s salary to buy a farm in Monroe, where he and his family spent summers for 20 years. They sold the farm in 2004, and Moore and his wife Sandra purchased a small, nearly derelict historic house on a crook of land along the east side of the Passagassawakeag River in Belfast. Following major renovations, they summered there, commuting from Philadelphia, where Moore was chair of the fine arts department at the University of Pennsylvania. In 2014, they built a capacious, light-filled studio addition, made the old studio into a living room, and moved to Belfast year-round. Moore is renowned

for his evocative, skillfully rendered composite images that distill direct observation, memories, sketches, and photographs of multiple locations into plausible, imagined scenes—a constructed world where time and place elide, and the present is eternal.

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Two Bridges, 2023, oil on canvas, 46" x 46", depicts Belfast Bay looking south from the artist's studio.

SM: You studied painting at Yale in the late 1960s when the dominant style was abstraction, yet you stayed true to representation. What led you to buck the trend?

JM: While abstraction was dominant at Yale when I was a student in the sixties, there were always a few teachers and painters in my classes who were representational artists. I tried to buy into the worlds of abstraction, but many of my classmates were better, more knowledgeable, and more committed. My attention was always stimulated by the visible world and what I could see, taste, and touch. There



is always something seen that elates me, and that's where I went.

SM: While you were still a student, you started making the composite view paintings, which have become your hallmark. How did they come about?

JM: My studio at Yale didn't have a window, and I got tired of painting still lifes, so I started going into the hallway and sketching the window view there or from different locations around New Haven. Then, back in the studio, I'd combine them in a way that is intended to make them appear seamless. Everything in them is real, however, or could be real. That's the only rule: it could be real. What poet Wallace Stevens calls "the incessant conjunction between things as they are, and things imagined."

SM: You've said you are drawn to subjects that show "the weathered weight of time." What attracts you to the timeworn and often overlooked?

JM: In a word, character. There's dignity in places where time has taken its toll.



The artist's tools. He is renowned for his meticulously crafted paintings and drawings.



SM: You recently completed two large-scale paintings of the Belfast waterfront seen through the windows of your former studio in Pennsylvania. To the uninitiated, they look entirely realistic. Can you tell us about them?

JM: The paintings were both suggested by the light in Belfast. The light is fantastic here. The Red Dusk painting is of a view of the Front Street Shipyard juxtaposed with a dramatic evening sky here in Belfast but seen through the windows of my former studio in an old factory building in Philadelphia. I've used this window grid in several paintings, combining its geometric structure with a representational view. The same window format frames Yellow Dawn, a companion to Red Dusk, based on an early morning view of Belfast Bay seen from my back porch.

SM: What is your process? How do you develop a composition?

JM: I'll see something that catches my eye and make drawing studies on-site or take photos with my iPhone, then download the images to my computer to print out and collage them as a starting point for a composition. Then, I let serendipity take over.



Moore is drawn to subjects that show "the weathered weight of time."



Artist John Moore in his Belfast studio.

SM: Besides painting, you make large-scale, highly refined charcoal drawings. How do these two modes of working inform each other?

JM: The charcoal drawings are sometimes variations of the same subject of the paintings but have a different atmosphere, partly attributable to the medium of charcoal and partly attributable to the almost meditative aspect of doing them. Building tone out of touch is repetitive, like knitting, like meditating. Currently, I'm working on a series of drawings inspired by the old lime kilns in Rockport Harbor.

SM: What's next for you? Are there shows on the horizon or other studio news to share?

JM: I have a painting, Marker, suggested by a monument in Port Clyde to seamen lost at sea, that will be in a show this summer at the National Academy of Design in New York. I also have a solo show coming up at Hirschl & Adler Gallery in New York in October. And a monograph, John Moore: Portals, is coming out this fall, which Carl Little is editing, published by Marshall Wilkes.