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Artist John Moore found beauty in aging infrastructure. Will America?

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John Moore, *Departure*, 2021, oil on linen, 54 x 72 inches

Is there beauty in decay? Optimism to be had in aging buildings, bridges and buoys? Is there a philosophy to be worked out on in a composite oil on linen painting of a Maine sky at dusk seen through block glass framing from an old factory in Philadelphia?

If infrastructure is having its unlikely moment across America, at the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia, painter John Moore has injected a mix of surrealism, beauty and a somewhat unresolved outlook into the conversation.

Moore, 80, a former Penn art professor and chair of Penn's Department of Fine Arts, painted in Philadelphia for four decades and now lives in Maine. He says he's always been an op-

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timistic artist, despite a long fascination with decaying metal structures, peeling paint and silent oversized bells.

At the opening of his latest exhibition in November, consisting mostly of works painted during 2020 and 2021, he was surprised to hear people describing the paintings as darker than his usual work.

“What affected me more than anything else was the isolation of the last year,” Moore said in a recent interview. “A number of people have said about the show, this is darker than you normally did. It just came out that way. I wasn’t consciously thinking about it.”

The paintings, which marry the sharp angles and hard materials of bridges, factories, water towers and buoys with the lush beauty of a Maine bay’s sky at dusk, are collected in an exhibit at the Locks Gallery on Washington Square, entitled *Here and There*, on view through Dec. 23. It is Moore’s 6th solo show at the gallery since the mid 1990s.

‘The texture of Time’



John Moore, *Summer Evening*, 2021, oil on linen, 54 x 72 inches

Moore cites as inspiration Philadelphia-based architect Louis Kahn in talking about old things, “architecture in particular, which retains on its surfaces the texture of time.”

“[Kahn] said, ‘There is a beauty in the fact that they are now in repose,’ “ Moore quoted.

Moore found such textural layers in the Globe Dye Works building on Worth Street in Kensington, where he kept a studio for a decade, a place that “betrayed its history in the texture of its walls.”

The building is featured in several paintings at the Locks Gallery, its layers of paint peeling

away from brick, its thick block glass, and its windows into interior spaces and exterior skies playing with perspective.

“Looking through a painting into something is an important component,” Moore said. “The window motif in particular I’ve used more than once. It’s part of the game working two dimensionally.”

Missing Philadelphia

At the Globe Dye building, there was a dance company that rented space above his, a



John Moore, artist’s portrait, photo by Joseph Hu, 2010-11

photographer down the hall, the dense architecture of centuries-old Philadelphia everywhere he looked, and the ambient comforts of the pre-pandemic life of a city artist, surrounded by creative energy and the inspiration from an enduring built landscape.

For Moore, enamored with metal textures and wires, industrial block glass, rusting water towers, dense textures, utilitarian infrastructure he manipulates into art, often against darkening skies, to Maine seven years ago inevitably involved loss.

“I miss everything about Philadelphia,” he said.

In Maine though, with a house that faces a western sky over water, he found bell buoys, memorials to fallen seamen, a bridge to a little island and an endless variety of sunset skies reflected in Belfast Bay. A sundial, depicted after the sun has set, is from Northern California. He has several images of large metal bells that might additionally evoke a famous Philadelphia one, especially hanging in the current location a few blocks from Independence Mall.

With his wife, Sandra, a designer, he says he found work during the solitude of the pandemic productive. But he says the COVID deaths of some close friends took a toll that he says found its way into his latest work.

In *Vespers*, he allows one person to populate his canvas, a man sitting on a bench, possibly praying. “I was aiming for that melancholy elegiac moment,” he said. On the right, fall’s



John Moore, *Vespers*, 2020-21, oil on linen, 54 × 72 inches

yellow leaves are illuminated, the beauty of decay there an easy lesson from the natural world.

In true Moore composite fashion, the angel at the top of the fountain at the painting’s foreground is taken from the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, while the fountain itself is from Bar Harbor. The image of the man on the bench was inspired by his neighbor.

Another inspiration, he says, was the early 18th century painting by Antoine Watteau entitled, “La Perspective (View through the Trees in the Park of Pierre Crozat)”

‘Beauty in that’

Walking into the Locks Gallery, located on the southeast corner of Washington Square, you immediately confront *Departure* hanging on the back wall of the main gallery.

The colors are more vivid in person, with the oranges and yellows of the peeling paint in the foreground convincingly holding their own beauty against the yellow and purples of the sky out the back industrial windows.

A lone desk is inside the studio, on a floor that shimmers like the water Moore so often



John Moore, *Tulips and Water Tower*, 2021, oil on linen, 24 x 30 inches

paints. Departure has a feeling of abstract expressionism to it, with its large swatches of color anchoring the composition, but its subjects are taken from real life, meticulously rendered: The image is literally the studio Moore painted in.

Moore allows himself the liberty of the composite: objects and structures drawn from one location, placed at the artist's whimsy in another location. The elements are real; the overall composition fanciful, even surreal.

In *Tulips and Water Tower*, a giant rusted water tower juts up against the window and seemed to transform into the stems of the tulips placed on the sill in a vase of water. The tulips look massive, other water towers in view are lit up bright yellow, the sky purple.

In the distance, two smokestacks. A sheer curtain flutters against an open window. Is it a nice view? Which part will endure? One tulip is already falling limp. Can there be beauty in a smokestack, in rusted metal?

"My basic outlook is optimistic," Moore said. "I see beauty in that as well."