

ARTS REVIEW >

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Art review: At Cove Street Arts, exhibits on oil and water make an absorbing mix

A show of watercolors by various artists and another of photographs of oil tanks by Tim Greenway are both on display at the Portland gallery.

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Gregory Jamie, "Untitled 20," watercolor and graphite on paper, 14 x 20 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist

There's no connection between the watercolor works in "Eau, the Water" (through Nov. 27) and Tim Greenway's large-scale photographs in "Refined Resurgence" (through Dec. 11), two shows currently at Cove Street Arts. They're interesting for different reasons, but equally absorbing.

Watercolor is often thought of as a means to an end, a medium used in studies for larger paintings destined to be executed in oil. In the public image, at least, they tend to hold less value, perhaps because of their washed-out colors or a perception of being "dashed off" by an artist. Watercolor is also not often a medium artists employ for difficult or "important" subject matter. George Grosz's scathing caricatures of 1920s Berlin society are a notable exception.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Eau, the Water" and "Refined Resurgence"

WHERE: Cove St. Arts, 71 Cove St., Portland

WHEN: Through Nov. 27 ("Eau") and Dec. 11 ("Refined")

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday

ADMISSION: Free

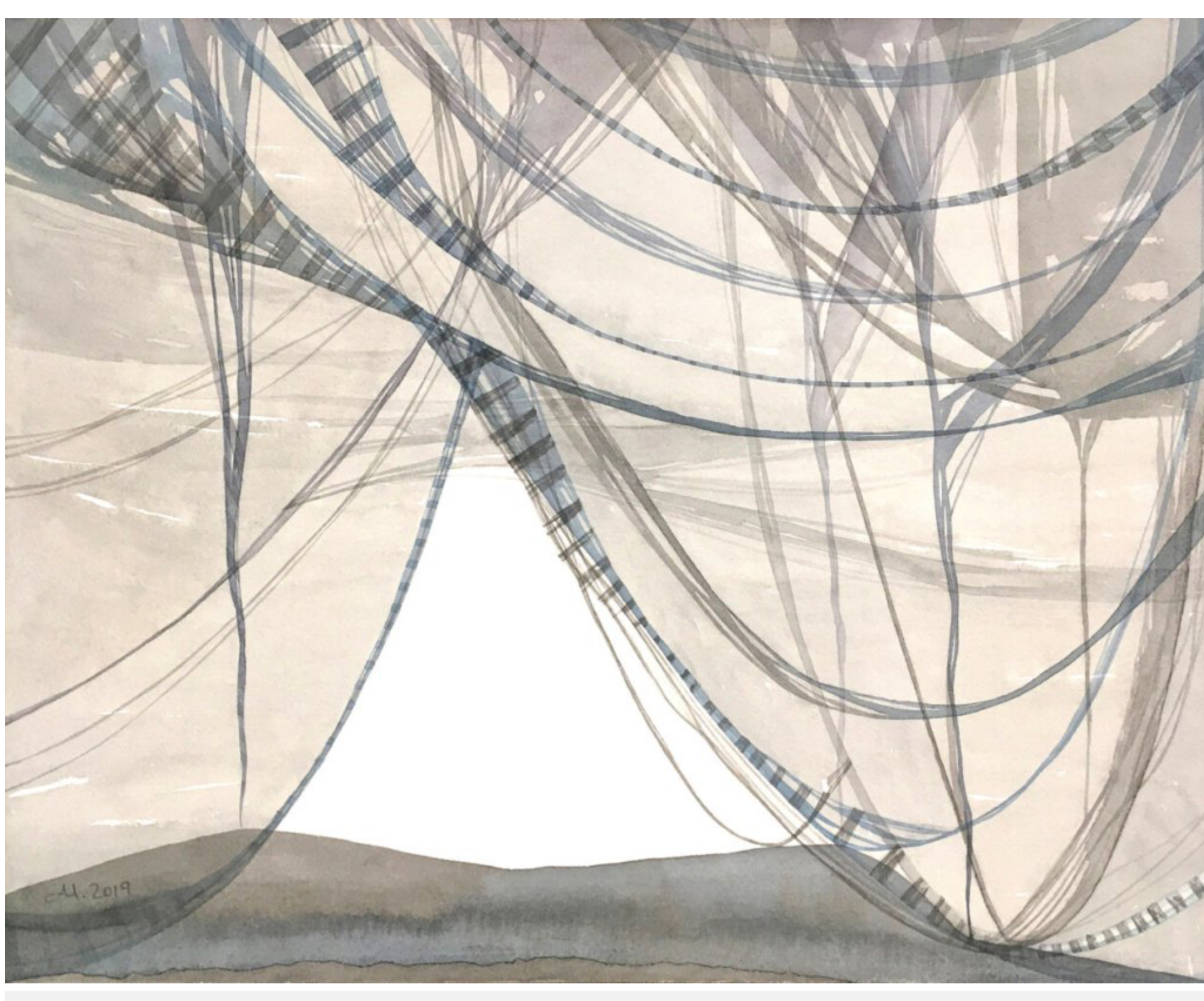
INFO: 207-808-8911, covestreetarts.com

But we need look no further than the work of Portland artist Gregory Jamie to see, for instance, how intensely saturated watercolor can be, and how it can convey subject matter that is deeply unsettling. Jamie cites as muses the so-called Outsider artists Henry Darger and Bill Traylor, the sexually subversive Carol Rama and Martín Ramírez, who was diagnosed as schizophrenic and institutionalized for the last 15 years of his life.

Indeed, Jamie's works, all untitled, have a Hieronymus Bosch quality, but feel even more disturbing than those of his 15th century Netherlandish forebear. The reason for the deformities and tortures in the characters of Bosch's art is obvious: They are the damned, irrevocably bound for the fires of hell.

Yet Jamie's phantasmagorical characters – devils, people entombed by trees and rocks, skeletons, sexually threatened women, creatures that are hybrid bull-cat-men-dogs – are weirder and scarier because we don't know exactly what is going on. In his statement the artist explains, "Abstract and childlike creatures are being punished by nature for wandering outside of their parameters. These are beings consumed by nature."

But what were their transgressions? Refusing to recycle? Tainting groundwater with chemicals? Defying natural processes with vain plastic surgery? They are fairytales more ominous than anything those Grimm brothers could dream up, and the mysteriousness of them is what fascinates and horrifies. These works are even more evolved than those he showed last year at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art's biennial.



Marcie J Bronstein, "Early Evening," watercolor on paper mounted on board, 16 x 20 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist

Belfast-based Marcie Jan Bronstein offers much more lyrical works that are both more self-reflective and hopeful. For one thing, most of them feature some sort of portal into a pristine, soothing white space, a way out, it seems, from our interior turmoil. The majority are abstract, though the forms and colors surrounding each portal can alternately suggest stones around a cave opening ("Cause and Effect," "Father"), sheer drapes ("Dawn," "Dusk," "Early Morning"), webs ("Private Renaissance," "Karma") or a mix of these ("Grace," "Zen"). Another group comes from a series called "Still Point" featuring Bronstein's cat, Bacio.

The latter were done during the COVID-imposed isolation of last year, when Bacio became "an anchor, a beacon of calm, and a master of mindfulness," says her statement. The title of the series came from "the still point in a turning world" referred to in T.S. Eliot's poem "Burnt Norton."

Yet the suspension of time with which much of the poem concerns itself could just as easily apply to all these works, which ultimately refer to the stillness within ourselves that allows us to open to unexpected, often wondrous, things. With consummate skill, Bronstein uses the watercolor medium to "pull" colors across the paper and, in so doing, mimic the act of pulling apart the webs, films and curtains that obscure our truer nature, where all is possibility and potential.

Dudley Zopp, based in Lincolnville, enlists watercolor to evoke ideas about nature. "The tension between the indifference of the earth's tectonic movements and the fragility of human existence, the tenuousness of all life forms" she writes, "seems to me a logical place to begin making art."



Dudley Zopp, "Climbing the Bluegreen Mountain 1," Watercolor and graphite on fabriano paper, 90 x 55 inches. Photo by Jonathan Lawrence

This tension is not immediately apparent. Rather, the works evoke jellyfish, lily pads with tendrils, schools of plankton and other aquatic life. Despite their title, even four enormous "Bluegreen Mountain" paintings initially give this impression. But seen in the larger context of her statement, we begin to realize that they are ultimately more about the crumbling and dissolution of all forms.

Our view that watercolors are generally small works is another assumption that the "Bluegreen Mountain" paintings busts open. They measure 90-by-55 inches, unequivocally demanding our attention and exuding enormous power. Within the context of the title, they also intimate the persevering power of water ("eau" in French) itself. We can interpret these as stones on a mountainside

being broken apart and crumbling into dirt by the constant freezing and thawing of water.

There is nothing dashed off, minor, washed out or superficial about anything in "Eau." And that may give us all a new appreciation of watercolor's potential to move and transform.

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