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March 8 - 15, 2001


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Ageless vitality

George Daniell's new watercolors and classic photographs

By Jenna Russell

"Recent Watercolors and Vintage Photographs," by George Daniell, at Aucocisco Gallery, 615a Congress St., Portland, through March 25. Tues. through Sat. from noon to 5 p.m.

I first saw George Daniell's watercolor paintings on a cool summer night in Southwest Harbor, in the back-room gallery at an unusual, out-of-the-way Mexican restaurant. The hour was late, the tequila was flowing fast and golden, and friends and strangers swapped loud, enthralling stories. The paintings were tucked in the plastic sleeves of a big black portfolio, and their fluid fruit colors seemed to capture the essence of that evening — the joy in the moment, the inexplicable chemistry of place and people.



"EXALTATION," by George Daniell, watercolor, 2000.

Daniell's show at Aucocisco this month fuels the same exuberance. Not to be simple or sentimental, but these paintings make you happy; if you let them. There are landscapes with leaping, rolling figures and landscapes without them, many from recent years. And here and there gallery owner Andy Versoza pairs a painting with one of Daniell's black-and-white photographs, the medium for which the Trenton artist is best known. The pictures hanging here are mostly of Maine lobstermen; the photos that made Daniell's name in his New York days were of famous people: Audrey Hepburn, Georgia O'Keefe, Sophia Loren. Maine arts writer Edgar Allen Beem has observed that we expect movie stars to be beautiful — it was hard to go wrong with a

camera pointed at Hepburn — but the sculptural elegance of Daniell's working seamen is more breathtaking for being less expected.

Because the lobstermen of the photographs are timeless in their rolled-up shirtsleeves and sunburns, and because the watercolors are so vigorous, so virile in subject and painterly approach, it would be natural to imagine a 20-year-old artist produced all the works. In fact, Daniell is 90, and while he studied painting at Yale and painted on and off throughout his career, he immersed himself in the medium only in more recent years. A native of Yonkers, New York, he was smitten with Monhegan on an initial visit in the 1930s, but didn't return to Maine to live until 1960. As if to cement his place here, an intact group of 14 of Daniell's drawings and 14 photographs from that first Monhegan visit have been offered as a gift to the Portland Museum of Art, Versoza said.

Daniell has written with startling honesty of the difference between the two processes — making art with a camera versus a brush — and has concluded that painting is not only different, but more difficult. Looking at his paintings, it's impossible to imagine the artist struggling over them. Sprint-speed volleys of blue and violet and yellow — a palette, except for the greens and browns, that might be drawn exclusively from sunsets — they are all fluid ease, braced with seemingly effortless strength and vitality. The veteran photographer, master of the painstaking calculation crucial for darkroom success, might first have been overwhelmed at the dizzying freedom afforded him with each sheet of blank watercolor paper. At this stage of the painting game, Daniell's lack of inhibition seems complete.

In "Lone Tree" (1998), the sun is a pink bull's-eye in a yellow sky as soft as an old chamois cloth, and fat clouds are weighted by black underbellies. There's a transcendent sensuality in the way the soft sky feathers down to the ground, where the elements — blue and gray boulders, green grass, red and orange stones — are soldered together like jewels in a crown of earth. The composition is flawless, uncomplicated; the tree itself is a godlike simple thing, and it may be that assembly this newborn-lucid can only be the product of aged and experienced vision. The older painting "Mexican Coast" is less resolved. Its sienna, berry and ocher rocks are a living, seething whole; frothing at one edge like a volcano.

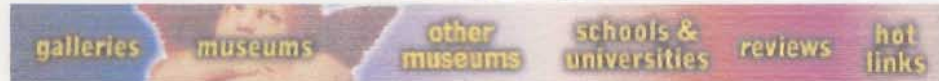
Daniell was influenced by John Marin, whom he famously photographed, and by Marsden Hartley (Daniell's "After Hartley" is a tribute), but his paintings also honor Henri Matisse, in their liberated color and their fondness for the human form in all its naked glory. Pictures like "Spring Fever" and "Lust on the Blueberry Barrens," with their nude male and female forms cavorting freely in the out-of-doors, recall the otherworldly energy of Matisse's "La Danse." They are as alive as people in paintings can get.

Some of Daniell's paintings are bold and essential in the way of Matisse paper cut-outs: "Exaltation" has a lone man standing half-submerged in purple water, lifting his arms into a red sky with joy that feels almost religious. The physicality of the image is underlined by the vintage

photograph hanging beneath it, in which a bare-chested Mainer hoists a dripping lobster high in the air with each hand.

Friends say Daniell is a vigorous, unpretentious presence, a physically beautiful man who still lives with fullness and abandon despite the lingering effects of a stroke. As a young man, he swam vigorously, drove cross-country, and steamed to Europe, meeting and photographing the last century's essential writers and artists. The fullness of his life could be symbolized by the figure in "Spring Fever," who lifts a basket full of red fruit or flowers to the sky. The gesture is ceremony and celebration, a nod to life forces or mystic realms beyond the painting's borders. The calm and contentment that grow in the presence of these works suggests the Buddhists are right, and inner peace results from communion with the moment. Daniell describes that communion, recording simple moments experienced fully and with elation. Each is a vivid lesson in total awareness, the warmth of limber muscles and the flush of sunset clouds.

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