

An English Artist Finds Inspiration on the Rocks

Christine Temin, The Boston Globe, Wednesday September 22 2004

Beverly – Separated though they are by thousands of miles of ocean, Boston’s North Shore and Cornwall, at the southwestern tip of England, have in common a sense of isolation, of being spiritually closer to the sea than to the populous island.

Both also have a granite coastline that is a magnet for artists. American Luminist master Fitz Hugh Lane painted the rocks of Cape Ann in the 19th century. This summer, 200 years after Lane’s birth, British artist Michael Porter made an extended visit to Cape Ann to paint a similar subject in a very different way.

Lane’s rocks exist in a context. They’re dark markers; beyond them stretches a seemingly endless sea. Porter’s rock paintings are all rock, with no horizon line, no ocean. They’re akin to Monet’s late paintings, with every inch of canvas consumed by a single subject. And, like those Monets, Porter’s pictures can almost be seen as abstract. Monet would have objected to that label, and so does Porter. “I am a landscape artist,” he says with conviction.

It was the Montserrat College of Art’s residency program that brought porter from Cornwall for three months this summer. The results of that sojourn are on view in four North Shore venues: Montserrat’s two galleries, the Cape Ann Historical Museum, and the Jane Deering Gallery in Gloucester.

Deering, a dealer who divides her time between London and Cape Ann – and is making a real impact on the Cape’s sleepy art scene – first proposed Porter’s visit. She and Montserrat Gallery director Katherine French believe that importing artists from elsewhere will help restore the North Shore art community’s vitality. In the first half of the 20th century, painter Stuart Davies, sculptor Paul Manship, photographer Aaron Siskind, and others of their ilk worked there.

Gradually, though, the art community became hermetically sealed and self-referential. On Cape Ann, the term “outsider artist” has an entirely different meaning that in the rest of art world. There, it’s a geographic term, not a stylistic one.

No matter which side of the Atlantic he’s on, Porter begins his work by taking walks, taking pictures and collecting shells and rocks on beaches. His actual art is all made in the studio. Unlike artists who believe that landscapes must be derived from sketches made in nature, Porter achieves his freshness through the camera, which to him is a way of gathering neutral information, an impartial accuracy no sketch can match. Back in his studio the photographs become a vocabulary he translates into astonishingly complex images. Translucent veils hover in the foreground, allowing your eye to penetrate into the depths, where there are collage elements: rocks upstaging or interrupting one another, as they might in a cubist painting. And, like abstract expressionist master Jackson Pollock, Porter liberates his work from the easel, putting his paper or canvas flat on the floor to maximize his physical freedom in relation to the rectangle. He also uses a buildup of

acrylic medium to create a subtle relief on the surface. He doesn't like the character of canvas and aims to obliterate its weave so you're aware only of what's on top of it. If he could paint the air, he probably would.

That there is more than one way to "see" a stretch of shoreline is underscored by the diptych format he favors. At Montserrat, Porter's commanding "Coastal Rocks, Diptych" is among the most arresting pieces in a group show called "Ocean View." The left side is gritty, grainy, hyperactive, the lush palette of mauve and quiet blues accented by black and white. The painting surges, like water running over the rocks. The right side is chillier, more static, gloomier in palette, concentrating on the shape and grain of the stone. The juxtaposition of the two begs another comparison to Monet, this time with the series paintings that depict the same place changing with the season, weather, and light. Porter's solo turn at Montserrat includes four more diptychs, drenched in blues, offering a wealth of textures, from ethereal and cobwebby to blunt and bold. Imagine a real rock that incorporates glittering metallic specks, a seemingly infinite range of colors and graining, and shapes that leave geometry's principals far behind. To describe it completely would take as long as it would to describe one of Porter's paintings.

The Montserrat show also incorporates his paintings on photograms, a cameraless process with objects placed between light-sensitive paper and a source of light. In Porter's case the objects are rocks: Their glowing, hovering white silhouettes appear on the paper, and then Porter paints an exquisitely detailed miniature of a shell in the centre. With these works, Porter enters the territory of Surrealism, especially in one image of a blue-black mussel shell floating in front of those mysterious white silhouettes. The shell is open, as if it wants to speak; it has an iconic force. The painting looks like a photograph; the actual photograph behind it looks like an abstract painting.

The series of gouaches at the Cape Ann Historical Museum are all titled "Shell, Sitting Still," after the first line of a poem by Marsden Hartley, who is far less well known as a writer than as a painter, another one associated with Gloucester in its heyday. I haven't seen the Porter gouaches yet. A tip to save what for many would be a long drive in vain: One of the quirks of this museum is that it is closed on Sunday, the day when most museums have their highest attendance.

Michael Porter says that when people walk through a landscape, they can do so "with a glance or a gaze." They can pass through quickly, casually noting the beauty of the place, or they can linger to take in the details. You can do both with Porter's work. But you'd be cheating yourself if you didn't spend some serious time with them, mentally peeling away those layers, delighting in revelation after another.