

GALLERIES

No shorthand for Wardwell's feisty effects

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, July 1, 2014, 6:00 p.m.



Joe Wardwell's "Do What They Told."

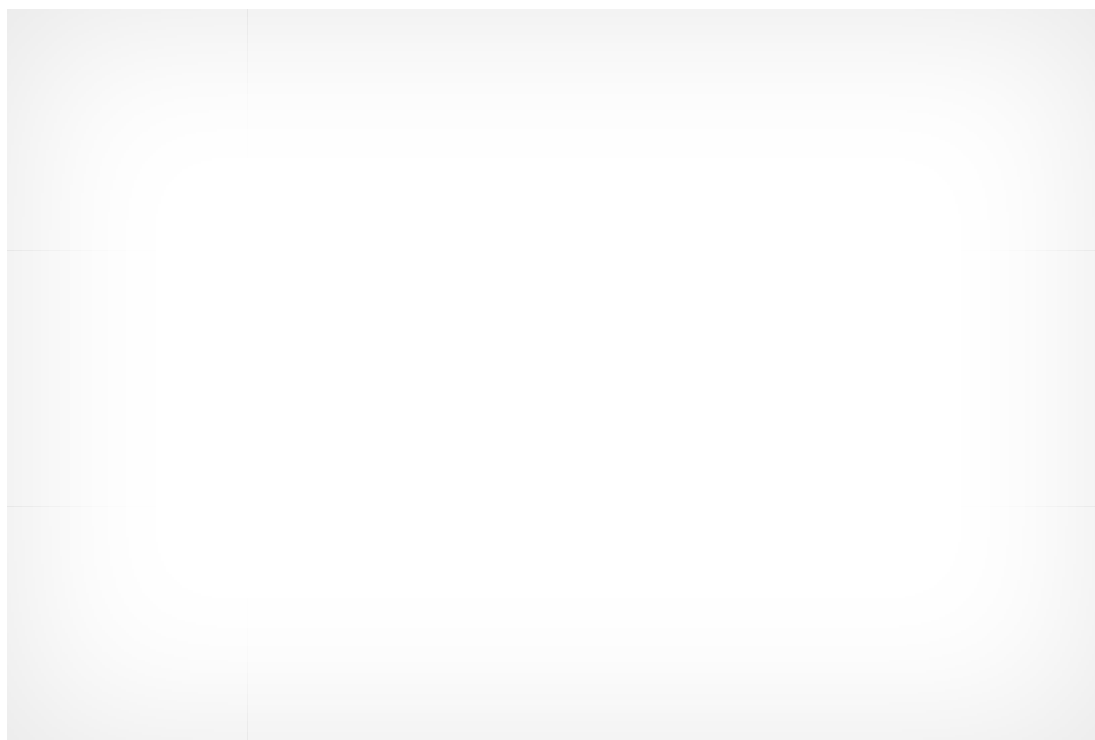
Follow an artist over several years, and often you begin to think in shorthand. Joe Wardwell, for instance, is the guy who blends rock lyrics with landscapes. He's still doing that, in his new show at LaMontagne Gallery, but when I saw it, I was struck by how confining and useless shorthand can be.

Wardwell has taken a dazzling leap, fully and aggressively integrating gestural abstraction into his equation. The earlier works used blocky text emblazoned through sunsets and mountain scenes to question and skewer the valiant dream of American landscape painting. The landscape floated within the letters, or it appeared in the spaces between them. The words fractured and abstracted the landscapes, as the urge to read competed with a desire to let go into that sunset.

Here, feisty, expressive brushstrokes fill in the letters and the sparkling landscapes occupy the negative space, or vice versa. Three different ways of reading the world clash, as three different circuits in our brains spark. Careful, you may see stars.

The two styles of painting Wardwell deploys are both American and both, in some way, heroic. His landscape work echoes rapturous 19th-century landscape paintings such as Albert Bierstadt's, and their sense of manifest destiny. His abstraction, wet and brazen, recalls action painters such as Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline.

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In "Do What They Told," letters march in stacked rows across the painting, tighter

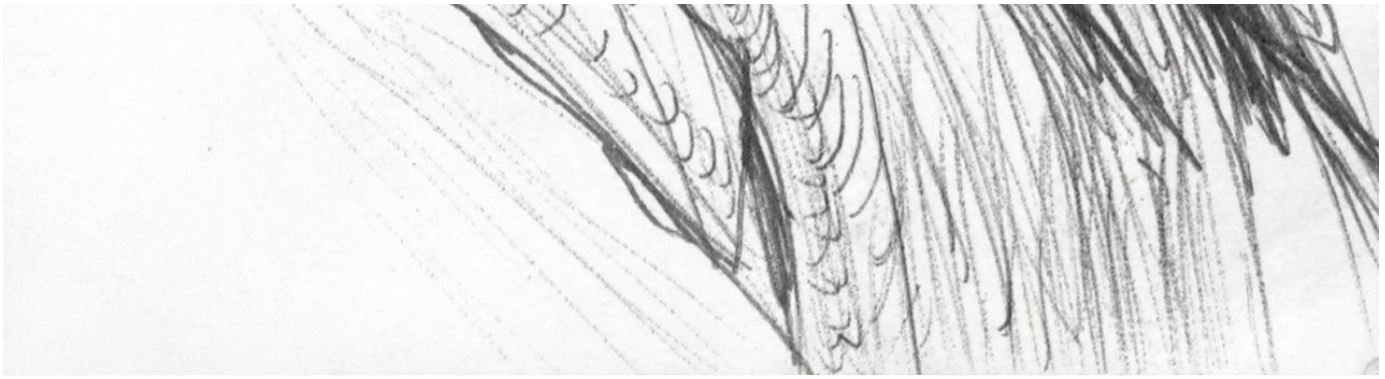
than a banner headline. They portray a sparkling sunset over water, and the spaces between them are filled with a shimmering, vaporous cherry red, fuchsia, and lime abstraction. The colors jump and jangle. The clouds breaking up the sky, fractured by the text, are no less abstract than the hot tones surrounding them. Yet, sense is made: Picture, words, and gestures, the tension among them taut.

Not all the paintings work quite so elegantly. “Rebel Souls, Deserters, We Are Called” is too caffeinated, and everything gets lost. Other, blunter pieces forgo the abstraction for unvarnished canvas. When Wardwell leans away from action painting and toward color field painting, the results are quieter, easier to read. They’re good, but not as frankly challenging as the more gestural works.

Perhaps he makes these simpler pieces because he’s attached to the message in his marriage of text and landscape: “Party Over” is the show’s title. The works with wilder abstraction make that message harder to read. But they say more than words alone can about the tension and chaos we are inflicting on the land.

Wilson’s technique, acute eye





John Wilson's "Head Bowed."

The wonderful figurative artist John Wilson, 92, had quite a celebration in 2012 and 2013, with a rich retrospective at Danforth Art and an accompanying show at Martha Richardson Fine Art. Martha Richardson has mounted a new exhibit of Wilson's small drawings, made since 1949. These are mostly sketches; the artist carries drawing materials with him and works whenever he can.

They read like finger exercises, not finished works, but they display a nimble technique that moves from loose swoops to tight crosshatches, and an acute eye. "Couple Reading" depicts a classic waiting-room scene: a pair plopped side by side. He has a laptop; she holds a newspaper. They both have the inert posture of those who wait, slumped shoulders and stolid faces. In his keen attention to such details, it's easy to sense Wilson's compassion.

The show features some delicate portraits that seem to catch their subjects in intimate moments, such as "Head Bowed," which renders in profile a man in prayer, contemplation, or perhaps shame, and "Child," portraying a small girl with an upturned nose and her eyes cast downward.

Wilson fancifully drew "The Picnic" on a paper plate. The circular format lends itself to the composition, as two people sit on the grass in the foreground and the horizon line crosses behind them. They, too, look weary, but it feels as if this is their world, and at this moment, it's a benign one.

Self-acceptance and comfort

“Engendered,” a group show at Atlantic Works Gallery, addresses personal drag — how we present ourselves, and the tools we use to do it. It’s a spotty show, but there are a few strong, funny, and poignant pieces.

In Rebecca Ulm’s video “Putting My Face On,” the artist covers her entire face with bright red lipstick, amplifying the kiss-my-lips aesthetic of makeup ads to ridiculous proportions while also suggesting war paint. I can’t decide whether Suzanne Schireson’s odd painting “Pink Winter” is a mistake or a triumph, a response that may convey something about the subject — a slouchy person painted in muted tones, wearing a huge, brilliant ball of a neon-pink and orange jacket — at once withdrawn and defiant.

There are references to the painful past (and perhaps present). Curator Samantha Marder’s diorama, “Modess Ball,” wickedly recalls the bizarre glamour of a mid-20th-century ad campaign for sanitary napkins. And painter Adric Giles’s “Confined” shows a figure so twisted and contorted into the squarish space of the panel he is painted on, his neck looks like a corkscrew.

“Confined” aside, the message of “Engendered” generally moves beyond gender and sexuality to an expression of self-acceptance and comfort in the world.

More information:

JOHN WILSON: Small Drawings

At: Martha Richardson Fine Art, 38 Newbury St., through July 12. 617-266-3321,
www.martharichardsonfineart.com

At: Atlantic Works Gallery, 80 Border St., East Boston through July 7. 617-529-5055,
www.atlanticworks.org

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