

In 'Flight,' plenty of room for interpretation

The exhibit at Cove Street Arts was conceived last year, but the pandemic added another dimension.



Lissa Hunter, "Blackbird Fly"
Photo courtesy of Cove Street Arts

By JORGE S. ARANGO

REVIEW

When Lissa Hunter was asked to curate a show at Cove Street Arts a year ago, she lit upon “Flight” (through Dec. 5) as her overarching thematic structure. But she invited her Maine artists to interpret this rubric very liberally: as escape, as wind-in-your-hair momentum, as birds or airplanes or rockets, as a fly ball or a flight of stairs. She also wanted to encompass multiple genres and media, as well as artworks that sprang from a materials-based approach emphasizing craft.

Then COVID-19 arrived. This did not unanimously sway her artists’ intentions or submissions; some changed direction to consider contemporary realities, while some did not.

With a few others, it’s hard to tell for sure. But the results are mostly intriguing and, often, very beautiful.

Kathleen Florance’s contributions are breathtaking. Three of the four are quite large.

“Flight of Ideas #6,” a colorful assembly of lines and geometric forms that recalls the Suprematism-Constructivism of Kasimir Malevich and late-period Vasily Kandinsky, greets us. A closer look reveals the barely discernible outline of a butterfly.

On the other side of the wall are two very different depictions of a bee and a butterfly; the former rendered in charcoal, the latter in litho crayon and relief ink.

The bee telegraphs a stunning sense of motion – wings drawn in a state of time-lapse fluttering, back legs little more than frenetic zigzagging lines. It has the energy of a spontaneous, rapidly dashed-off sketch, but at the magnified scale (and effect) of 56-by-40 inches.

The butterfly, even larger at 67-by-59 inches, is a glorious spectacle of wings.

Enigmatically, however, the titles indicate these insects are actually not alive or in flight: “Spent” (bee) and “Crushed” (butterfly). This could be interpreted as an oblique nod to the pandemic, or simply to the troubled tenor of our times.

Some artists responded directly to the pandemic.

Lin Lisberger has a trio of works that mine this vein (a fourth is a more straightforward portrayal of a sledding hill that sweetly evokes childhood delights of speeding down a slope).

“20 Walks COVID” addresses the lockdown enforced as the virus surged. Lisberger used the abundance of scraps in her studio and colored pencils to sketch snapshots of encounters on daily walks around Portland – a sunset, a sidewalk quote, a wharf. These she connected with hemp and draped it over a chair like a quilt. It’s a moving chronicle not because of the images themselves, but because it’s about making do with what you have in a time of scarcity and isolation, and also a testimonial to the perseverance of art amid tragedy.

Two other pieces draw from literature. “At the Bottom of the River” shares its title with a Jamaica Kincaid short story, specifically a passage where a girl looks into a pool of perfectly still water and notices in her reflection that the only thing moving (read: flying) is her hair. Lisberger’s sculpture – a woman rooted in a house with twigs for locks – predates the pandemic but dovetails perfectly to convey the persistence of life within quarantine. The lyrical beauty of “White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field” is its reference to, as it happens, my favorite Mary Oliver poem about death and transformation.

It’s a meditation on the aftermath of the owl’s hunt, when it snatched prey that had been running in the snow,

leaving the imprint of its wings in the blanket of white.

New Gloucester-based ceramist Paul Heroux also changed course, trading in his original idea for platters sporting bird imagery for vessels glazed in smoky colors and imagery of the COVID virus. People dance around the toxin, shrinking from it and, sometimes, from each other. These pieces make clear that Heroux continues to be a master of his medium.

Hunter herself has several works in the show that represent both the pure elation of flight and less joyous contemporary issues that incite a desire (or need) to fly away. Her innovative technique involves gessoing panel or paper surfaces that she then builds up with pigments and, over them, charcoal. Working with cotton balls and Q-tips, she removes charcoal to reveal negative space around bird and landscape forms, which remain black, suffusing pieces in a visceral tactility.

“Fire Flight” is her creative reaction to recent California fires that incinerated over 4 million acres. Aptly, it’s mostly charcoal black forest with a few streaks of smoldering ember-colored pigment underneath that represent fire seen through the trees. The top eighth depicts flocks of birds fleeing the raging fire. It is a compelling image, simultaneously a cautionary tale and an elegy about global warming. Conversely, in the almost ecstatic “Blackbird Flight,” the dense flocks transgress beyond the canvas onto the wall around it.

There are no winged figures in the work of Gayle Fraas and Duncan Slade.

The idea of flight manifests most successfully in views of the infinite night sky, some with constellations mapped out. The best convey this endless void in resist-dyed cotton (stars are areas where they applied the resist medium) that has been stitched with circles that imply energy vortexes or time-lapse photography mapping the movement of stellar bodies across the sky. In “Cross River – North,” “Hendrick’s Head South” and “The Point – Northwest” this boundless expanse dominates, but it’s framed by blocky sections of landscape and colorful pattern.

Works executed with water-based media on paper are graphically interesting, yet feel less relevant within the context of the show.

Their long, narrow proportions offer only a slice of sky, mitigating their sense of being expansive, voids through which to fly, and their juxtaposition of landscape with sonar charts and topographical maps makes them feel decidedly earthbound. “Traverse” conveys flight through the gently billowing movement of 24 silk panels suspended in space.

Printmaker Lisa Pixley’s work has a tongue-in-cheek quality, as in “A Not Very Still Life” (a vase of flowers in the act of falling off a table) and “No, You Let Go”

(two eagles clenching talons as they free fall through the air, which comments on the divisiveness of our current political scene). An older work, “Hero” seems ironic too, since there is nothing heroic about this flying tube-socked, jersey-wearing figure except his crown.

Tim McCreight – a metalsmith who set up the metals department at the Maine College of Art – also offers levity.

“Spinner” and “Take Off!” are rocks rigged, in vain hope of flight, to propellers.

Similarly, “Even a Brick Dreams of Flying” is just that: a brick “fuselage” with biplane wings. They’re visual puns, yet also heartbreaking in their futility.

The context of our fractious times also infuses these and works like “Straight Arrow” (which bends downward) and “Guided Arrow” (quivers with no arrowheads that point to each other) with different, perhaps unwelcome, meanings: failure to launch, the impossibility of getting anywhere amid political gridlock, or the downward and

conflicting directions in which we seem headed.

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IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Flight”

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

WHEN: Through Dec. 5

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