

Art review: Nathaniel Meyer's vivid twist on the Maine landscape

[pressherald.com/2019/04/28/art-review-nathaniel-meyers-vivid-twist-on-the-maine-landscape/](https://www.pressherald.com/2019/04/28/art-review-nathaniel-meyers-vivid-twist-on-the-maine-landscape/)

By Daniel Kany

April 28, 2019



"Taraxacum," Nathaniel Meyer, 24" x 36", oil on canvas Photos courtesy of Elizabeth Moss Galleries

I like paintings that pop. Actually, I like all sorts of paintings, including quietly meditative works. But paintings that pop – the ones that sort of leap out at you visually – are at the top of my list. Nathaniel Meyer's paintings now on view in "Arcadian Shores: Restoration of the Golden Age" at Elizabeth Moss Galleries are this kind of vivid.

ART REVIEW

WHAT: "Arcadian Shores: Restoration of the Golden Age," paintings by Nathaniel Meyer

WHERE: Elizabeth Moss Galleries, 251 Route 1, Falmouth

WHEN: Through May 18

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday

INFO: (207) 781-2620, elizabethmoss galleries.com

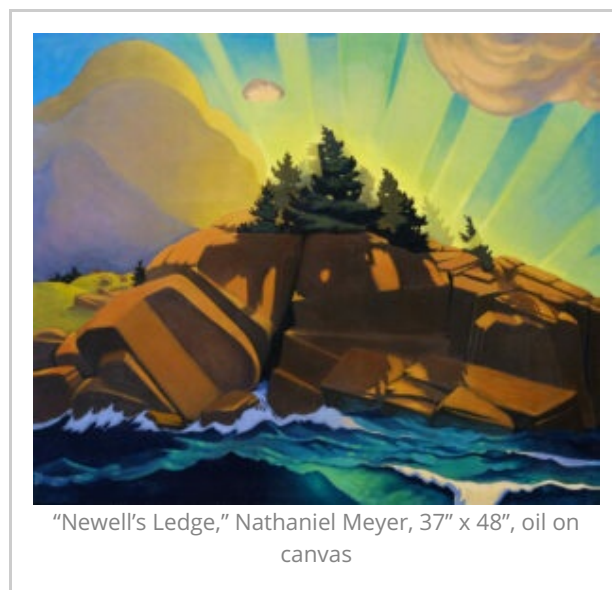
The best of Meyer's works in oil on canvas are bold and entertaining coastal landscapes. They look as though N.C. Wyeth and Maxfield Parrish had a baby who grew up to be a painter with, well, let's just say a psychedelic edge. In other words, they are bright and clearly delineated landscapes that prioritize intense color and imaginative details. They capture moments of uncanny quirk, scenes so engaging they return to us in our dreams, paroxysms of vision.

Meyer's "Newell's Ledge," for example, is a 37-by-48-inch oil unapologetically in line with N.C. Wyeth's well-known and locally loved "Black Spruce Ledge." Meyer's work doesn't include a fisherman, and instead of Wyeth's salmon-patterned altocumulus clouds, we see golden sun-rays blazing up laserlike from behind the island with clouds to either side and one tiny cloud launched up near the middle almost like a cotton-candy cannon ball stealing the site of the sun.

"Newell's Ledge" is unquestionably recognizable as a painting scene we have seen before. But with a longer look, we see it as Meyer's painting of a real place. It's a spot in our pictured memories of the Maine coast (we all know it, but most of us know it from images), and while Meyer tilts his art-history hat to his cloud-giant painterly forebears, he makes this scene his own. It is explosively lively and vivid with a quietly generous helping of magical realism.

Let's consider the title of the show for a moment. As hosts to Acadia National Park, we're closer to Arcadia than most of us realize. "Arcadia" refers literally to an area in Greece and the term, since the classical era, has meant "idyllic place." This is what explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano called the entire East Coast on his 16th-century map. (Yeah, there is an "r" in the Greek version, but anyone who has spoken with a real Mainer knows we have always had issues with the letter "r"; we add them to words that end with a hard "a" and remove them from words like "glacier.") Arcadia, which, in French is "Acadie" – hence the lack of the "r" – was a colony of New France that encompassed a huge region including Maine and the Canadian Maritimes from 1605 for more than a century. With the ping-pong pugilism of England and France, as our home, it was, politically at least, hardly idyllic.

Meyer's Arcadia, however, refers directly to the classical notion of landscape as sanctuary, a model of heaven for painters such as the classical/Baroque landscape genius Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) whose "Et in Arcadia Ego" set the standard for landscape paintings as moral refuge. In the Louvre's masterpiece, four shepherds discuss (and debate?) the meaning of the phrase chiseled into the stone of an ancient tomb. The phrase is Latin for "And I, too, am in Arcadia," which, in this case, we assume means "heaven." The shepherds' conversation is moral philosophy in action.



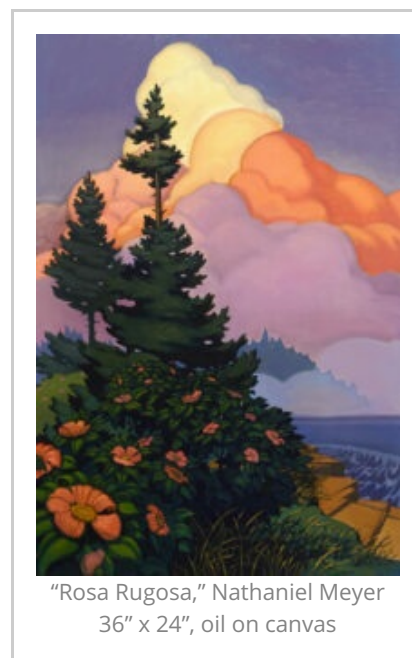
The “Golden Age” generally refers to the era shepherded by the advent of photomechanical reproductions that could be printed in journals, books and newspapers starting around 1880. Instead of relying on painstakingly redrawn images, artists and publishers could directly use paintings for publication. So artists like Howard Pyle, Aubrey Beardsley, Jules Guerin and Jessie Willcox Smith became household names. Pyle was N.C. Wyeth’s mentor, and, from there, we can watch as narrative painting reblossomed as a leading form of picture-making.

Meyer’s style is immediate and bold, quite the stuff of direct painting ushered in by Winslow Homer and the Impressionists, American as well as continental. While contemporary and a bit brash, it all fits. To be sure, establishing a standard among the likes of Wyeth, Parrish or, say, Violet Oakley, is like challenging Tiger Woods to a game of golf. But Meyer sets his stage for entertaining engagement; and that is a worthy goal, and one which Meyer fully achieves. He is, after all, not trying to outstrip his Golden Age forebears, but convey their language and pictorial values. And their values were based on audience connection rather than outstripping the accomplishments of others.

Meyer’s “Taraxacum,” uses, for example, the Latin name for “dandelion” but the scene is pure Maine coast as presented by the painters of Golden Age illustrations. Among a few evergreen witnesses watching from cliffy seaside perspectives, an N.C. Wyeth-like cloud bank rolls into a coastal nook: swirling clouds of caramel and swollen salmon approach a few almost psychedelically vivid dandelions on the near bank. Meyer’s trees, as with most of his dark forms, are unimpeachably dark and opaque forms that only serve to throw his peachy-white clouds into high relief.

In “Rosa Rugosa,” Meyer’s purple, orange, yellow and cream clouds soar above a simple landscape of pines, foreground flowers and a mist-invaded island fading forthwith into a visual distance.

“Raven’s Nest II” harkens a bit back to Meyer’s past paintings show at Moss (including a version of this specific scene). It depicts a special, though not so secret, spot near Schoodic just north of Acadia. Between Meyer’s lolling pink clouds and similarly scented primroses, we’re left to wonder if the uncanny quirk of the image is about Meyer’s subjective experience or if we’re so used to the scrubbing of such landscapes by painters that we have a hard time swallowing the oddity of actual imbalance. Ultimately, however, the psychedelic sense presses us to leave the stylized sensations to the artist and his ostensibly golden sensibilities.



The punctuation of "Arcadian Shores" is "Little Sugarpear Island," a playfully dreamy little mound of an island off the coast of Maine. And dreamlike it is. A Cheshire Cat sliver of a moon smiles over the scene. Stars flicker into life in the upper-left sky. Wispy clouds (mist, sleep or something else of smoke?) float in from the left, the narrative flicker start of the piece. A sprucey pine sways, pleasantly intoxicated, against the Parrish-like pouting cumulus cloud, while the others hold on to dance among themselves like where the wild things are: sometimes birchy-white and slender or mapley deciduous puff-sugared cotton candy confections.

Meyer's honest engagement is refreshing. His open and clear references are positive, respectful and appreciative. He clearly loves painting, admires his predecessors and likes his audience. And on top of that, he can handle a brush and has a thing for color. "Arcadian Shores" is a reminder that while painting can (and probably should) be challenging, it is at its best when it is appealing and entertaining. A few of the works in "Arcadian Shores" feel a bit rushed, but it seems that Meyer has something to say; and if that's the case, a bit of urgency seems just about right.

Freelance writer Daniel Kany is an art historian who lives in Cumberland. He can be contacted at:

[< Previous](#)

[Theater review: Experience a range of sentiments at the Maine Playwrights Festival](#)

[Next >](#)