

ALEXANDRE

The Boston Globe

By digging beneath the surface, Walker unearths treasures

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | November 19, 2004

The great painter John Walker spent last winter on sabbatical from his teaching duties at Boston University, reveling in the mud and rime of the cold Maine coast. The works he made there, many of which mix mud from the ocean floor with paint, can be seen at Nielsen Gallery. They are messy, brawny, exultant paintings.

Walker has long been known as an abstract painter, but most of these are landscapes. The horizon line comes under a ribbon of sky near the very top. This leaves a great stretch of earth over which Walker can exercise his tools of abstraction. Usually, a gulley drops down from the horizon, depicting a tidal pool, but there's never any sense that it stretches into the distance. Rather, it hangs flat and vertical, as if the earth is a body and the tidal pool its heart. Walker plays up this emotional pulse with color. He mostly works in earth tones and smoggy grays; smoldering red has been a constant. But in these works, brilliant jewel-like tones often bust through the muck, infusing the paintings with an unexpected light.

Late Fall, Low Tide sets a glowing blue sky over a tidal pool in shades of pink, orange, amber, and gray. It shines amid a field of green energized with yellow and orange flecks. A band of red at the bottom and a feathery column of purple on the right complete the image. Nothing is still: Walker activates every inch of his surface with color, and also with gesture and texture.

February Ice, John's Bay, Maine sticks to more muted tones, but they roil over the canvas, covered in a white confetti of broad brush strokes — the ice breaking on the sea rocks. The magnificent *Clammer's Moon* doesn't have much color, but it has plenty of the gritty wet sand that clammers dig for their quarry. A figure-eight shape depicts the tidal basin, but the ground that surrounds it draws you in; rutted, scraped over, dripped upon, its layers and gestures seem endless.

Other works are pure abstractions, layered with text — another Walker trademark. *Meeting House I* turns words from roadside signs into fluid line: You can make out "native" and "clams" circling around a pulpy mass that might be "blueberries." A dribble of muddy sand drops to the right of this otherwise airy canvas, Walker's reminder that nothing is this dreamy. His art and ideas always come back to the mud. This show suggests that the more he digs, the more gems he unearths.

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