

# ALEXANDRE

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## Painter John Walker Evokes Maine Coast With His Smelly Mud

*His Version of Coast  
Is Dug-Up Clam Holes,  
Dirty, Stinky, Open*

BY HILTON KRAMER

For the many people, whether tourists or natives, whose favorite memories of paintings of Maine are largely defined by the work of Winslow Homer in the 19th century and the Wyeth clan in the 20th, the art of John Walker is bound to come as something of a shock. Everything traditionally associated with the beloved imagery of the Maine coast and its weather-beaten landscape—the illustrational clarity, the crystalline light and the abundant detail of a down-home naturalism—is totally absent from Mr. Walker's paintings. Inducements to nostalgia are nil.

What one encounters instead in the

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artist's latest exhibition—*John Walker: A Winter in Maine, 2003-2004*, at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockport, Me.—are huge, sprawling expressionist canvases and smaller oil sketches on paper that give the observer what's best described as the clamdigger's view of the Maine landscape. In this view, the terrain tends to be muddy, the atmosphere overcast, the sky a distant band of mottled light,

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and the boundaries separating land from sea all but overwhelmed by a painterly virtuosity that's easily mistaken for outright abstraction. Yet as the eye habituates itself to these bold, highly charged depictions, what comes into focus are some of the most extraordinary landscape paintings of the modern era. Not since John Marin burst upon the American art scene in the 1920's and 30's have paintings of Maine succeeded to a comparable degree in setting

a new standard for pictorial innovation in the art world at large.

Like many Maine painters, Mr. Walker is, as Mainers say, "from away"—in his case, originally from Britain; he was born in Birmingham in 1939 and studied at the Birmingham College of Art in the 1950's. Then came Paris, where he studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in the 1960's, and New York, where he came under the sway of the regnant Abstract Expressionists. Nowadays Mr. Walker divides his working life between a coastal property in South Bristol, Me., the *mise en scène* of his current work, and Boston University, where he's a member of the art faculty. (He often brings his students to Maine as part of their course of instruction.) In New York, his work can often be seen at Knoedler & Company.

It's sometimes said of the Abstract Expressionist painters that they could be divided into two classes: those who put everything—which is to say, more than merely enough—into their pictures, and those who left out as much as possible while still giving us something to look at in what remained. Mr. Walker unquestionably belongs to the first category, for his appetite for overloading

his canvases is unmitigated, and he has found in the dour attractions of a muddy bay in South Bristol a correlative in nature that allows him to create a landscape art in a medium that is not only reminiscent of the viscous facture often seen in the work of the Abstract Expressionists, but at times actually incorporates mud itself—or what's sometimes called "sea cake" in the titles of his paintings—into the painted surface. What Mr. Walker's "sea cake" paintings recall for me are the lines

Bruce Brown, one of the curators of the current exhibition, asked him, "Technically, how do you get the mud to stick to the canvas and why do it?" This was Mr. Walker's response: "I've experimented with mixing various mediums with the mud. Basically dirt turns into cement, really. The fact that I take in these beautiful surroundings—the muddiest, smelliest, dirtiest cove to paint in—allows me to get beyond the beauty of the tourist sort of Maine. Mud has been a reoccurring theme in

my paintings for years ....

I have certainly always thought of paint as being colored mud. As you know, while I was involved with the first group of landscape paintings, I was concurrently painting my father's recollections of the First World War where mud was the theme—not only his recollection, but almost everyone's from that war. I like the fact that mud is dirty. If I'm painting and a clammer comes along and digs those big, dirty holes right in front of me, I truly believe that what I'm doing on canvas is just a pastiche. I really am moved when I see that his is the artwork and mine is just an impression. It always shocks me that these people come along and dig great holes and walk away from it and it looks just wonderful."

Well, as I say, this is no longer the Maine of Winslow Homer and the

Wyeths. *John Walker: A Winter in Maine, 2003-2004* remains on view at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockport through Aug. 29, and then travels to the University of Maine Museum of Art in Bangor (Sept. 24, 2004, to Jan. 8, 2005).



An appetite for overloading the canvas: John Walker's *Clammer's Marks, 2004*.

from the "Little Gidding" section of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "Dead water and dead sand / Contending for the upper hand."

For Mr. Walker, mud has clearly acquired an aesthetic, if not indeed a mystical significance. In a recent interview,

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