

# ALEXANDRE

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## A Prints Project That Took An Entire State to Mount

By DEBORAH WEISGALL

This fall Parson Fisher's bestiary will be on view at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, while up the road in Rockport the Center for Maine Contemporary Art will display Bowdoin College's Vinalhaven Press prints. Both shows are part of "The Maine Print Project: Celebrating 200 Years of Printmaking in Maine," an unprecedented statewide collaboration.

The project originated two years ago when Bruce Brown, for 15 years the curator at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, announced that he would retire. He planned his last exhibition to be a survey of printmaking in the state, from the first impressions to the present.

Maine art in many ways represents American art in microcosm: the scenery has attracted artists since there were ways of getting there. Prints are a tangle of art and commerce: they can be historical artifacts, intentional or inadvertent works of art; they may be intended for limited reproduction or for broad publication. So the subject was vast and uninvestigated, too complicated for a single exhibition.

As word got around, other organizations proposed shows; soon 25 museums and galleries were planning exhibitions of Maine prints. The results provide a surprising meditation on the intersection of place and art. The work of well-known artists with Maine connections — Winslow Homer, George Bellows, John Marin, Edward Hopper, Marsden Hartley, Rockwell Kent, Fairfield Porter and Neil Welliver — acquired a new context as superb works by artists with smaller reputations, including many women, were pulled from archives.

Exhibitions are being held up and down the state, from Presque Isle in the north to York in the south. The Portland Museum of Art is mounting a comprehensive historical overview. At the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, what Mr. Brown calls his "democratic" survey includes 225 artists. The University of Maine at Orono has a show of contemporary artists' books. Solo shows range from the work of recognized masters, like Alex Katz's mysterious and luminous silkscreens, to the intensely local, like Peggy Bacon's folksy vignettes.

All told, more than 2,000 images will be on display, and Bowdoin has overseen the publication of a sumptuous book, "The Imprint of Place: Maine Printmaking 1800-2005" (Down East Books), written by David P. Becker.

Maine's emotional landscape — the sense of remove, of introspection, of edge — is as pervasive as the physical one. Possibly it is this quality that continues to attract artists. In many places the view has stayed the same. Communities remain small and neighborly, one of the reasons the Maine Print Project succeeded.

In 2004, in the last year of his life, Mr. Welliver made an aquatint, "Trees Reflected on Ice." His wavering hand is evident, as well as his sure eye. He drew a frozen bog, an unearthly grid. He had recorded it many times before, in all seasons. It was his harsh Eden: not a place of innocence, but of knowing. In Maine's uncompromising light, he saw what was coming next.

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