

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Mud in  
Your Eye

John Walker  
re-envisioned the  
essence of Maine.

By Hilton Kramer

**T**he state of Maine has for many years advertised itself as "Vacationland" on its automobile license plates, and this is indeed the image that many non-Mainers carry in their heads—an image greatly reinforced by the landscapes and seascapes that Winslow Homer painted in the 19th century and the folksiness of Andrew Wyeth's paintings in the 20th century. Yet year-round residents of Maine tend to see things differently.

While summer in Maine is usually idyllic, and the color of the fall foliage is dependably brilliant, the autumn rains bring a chill and a gray, overcast sky that may last well into spring, by which time the coastal terrain has been transformed into a sea of mud. By then, too, the wood stoves are ablaze in many Maine houses, and a significant number of older residents have journeyed south to enjoy the sun and escape the perils of what is called the "mud season."

Not so the painter John Walker, who for some years now has made the muddy coastal terrain of Maine the principal focus of his extraordinary landscape paintings. These are bound to be shock-

ing to the traditionalists for whom the mud season holds little romance and who have never found much to admire in the works of the Abstract Expressionist painters of the New York School, another of Walker's enthusiasms. Everything customarily associated with a beloved imagery of the Maine coast—the illustrated clarity, the crystalline light, the downhome naturalism—is totally absent from Walker's paintings. Pictures of Vacationland they clearly are not.

What we encounter in the exhibition "John Walker: A Winter in Maine, 2003–2004" are huge, sprawling expressionist canvases and smaller oil sketches on paper that give the observer what is best described as the clamdigger's view of the Maine landscape. In this view, the terrain is certainly muddy, the atmosphere cloudy, the sky a distant band of mottled light, and the boundaries separating land and sea all but overwhelmed by a painterly virtuosity that is easily mistaken—at first glance, anyway—for outright abstraction. Yet, as the eye habituates itself to these bold, highly charged descriptions, what comes into focus are some of the most extraordinary landscape paintings of the modern era. For anything comparable in the history of Maine painting, you would have to think back to the 1920s and '30s when John Marin burst upon the American art scene with similarly powerful and provocative pictures of nature.

Like many Maine painters, Walker is, as Mainers say, "from away"—in his case, from Britain. He was born in Birmingham in 1939 and studied at the



John Walker's "Rising Tide," 2004, mixed-media, 97 1/2" x 85 1/2".

Birmingham College of Art in the 1950s. Then came Paris, where he studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in the 1960s, and New York, where he came under the sway of the regnant Abstract Expressionists. Nowadays Walker divides his working life between a coastal property in South Bristol, Maine, (the *mise en scène* of his current work) and Boston University, where he is 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 often can be seen at the Knoedler Gallery.

It was sometimes said that the Abstract Expressionist painters 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. Walker unquestionably belongs to the first category, for his appetite for overloading his canvases is unstinting, and he has found in the dour attractiveness of a muddy bay in South Bristol a correlative

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in nature that allows him to create a landscape in a medium that is not only reminiscent of the viscous facture often seen in the works of the Abstract Expressionists but at times actually incorporates mud itself—or what is sometimes called “sea cake” in the titles of his pictures—into the painted surface. What Walker’s “sea-cake” paintings recall for me are the lines from the “Little Gidding” section of T.S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets”: “Dead water and dead sand/Contending for the upper hand.”

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



*Walker's "Sea Cake No. 2," 2004, mixed-media, 84" x 66".*

Brown, one of the curators of the “Winter in Maine” exhibition, he was asked: “Technically, how do you get the mud to stick to the canvas, and why do you do it?” 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 just come along and dig great holes and walk away from it, and it looks just wonderful.”

Well, this is no longer the Maine of Winslow Homer and Andrew Wyeth. “John Walker: A Winter in Maine, 2003–2004,” organized by Bruce Brown and Wally Mason, was exhibited this summer at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockport, Maine. It currently can be seen at the University of Maine Museum of Art in Bangor through January 8. □

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