

Maine In the Abstract

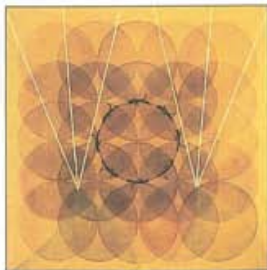
Not all Maine paintings are landscapes, but that doesn't mean they're not really Maine paintings. By Edgar Allen Beem.



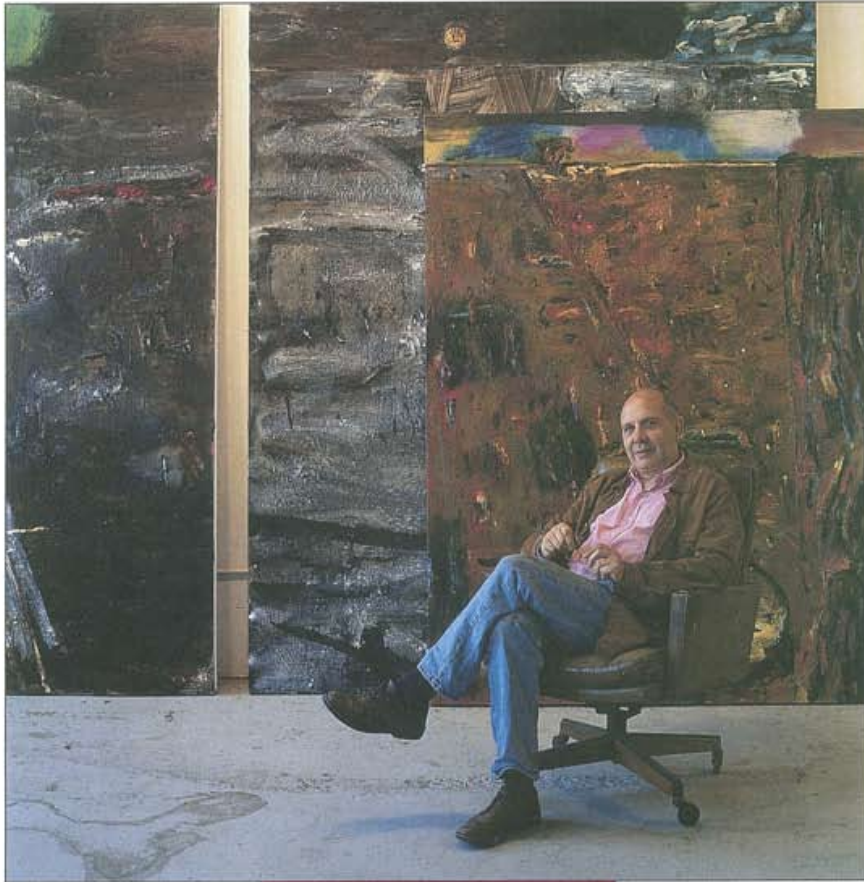
GIVEN the fact that the mainstream of American painting since the 1950s has been abstract art, it's surprising how resistant audiences can be toward abstraction. Casual viewers will protest that they don't get it, don't like it, and even suspect that something is being put over on them when faced with canvases devoid of recognizable imagery. But abstract art is like music. We don't expect to *hear* nature (wind, surf, thunder, rain, bird song) in music, for instance, and we shouldn't always expect to *see* nature in a painting.

What audiences often don't *get* about abstract painting is that a sea change took place in serious painting in the twentieth-century. A painting ceased to be just an imitation of reality and became a reality unto itself. As critic Harold Rosenberg, the great champion of the wildly exuberant Abstract Expressionism of the post-war years, wrote back in 1952, "What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."

Early Modernist painters in Maine such as Marsden Hartley (1877-1943) and John Marin (1870-1953) flirted with abstraction, exploring the personal dynamics of emotion and perception while maintaining a visual connection to landscape. A later generation of Maine painters such as Vincent Hartgen (1914-2002), William Kienbusch (1914-1980), and Denny Winters (1907-1985) made the abstracted landscape their primary focus. Today, some of the finest painters in Maine work in modes of abstraction that have little or no obvious connection to the landscape. But that doesn't mean that there's no Maine in these paintings or that they would look the same if they were made in, say, Ohio. Maine's abstractionists have been affected by their lives and surroundings here as profoundly as Andrew Wyeth or Fairfield Porter.



ALEXANDRE



JOHN Walker has maintained an invisible presence in Maine for thirty years, but it has only been in the last four or five that he has actually painted the coastal landscape near his country home on Johns Bay in South Bristol. Born in Birmingham, England, Walker chairs the graduate program at Boston University and is widely regarded as one of the finest painters on either side of the Atlantic. An Expressionist painter, he moves back and forth between abstraction and representation, conjuring in thick, turbulent oils both the tragedy of war and the physicality of Maine.

Walker's Maine retreat is a ranch house on Seal Point with a three-car garage studio that has, in his words, "the best view of any garage in the world." The property overlooks tiny Peabow Island and an expanse of mud that locals refer to as Dirty Cove. In response to this muddy tidal cove, John Walker has recently been making dense, muddy paintings quite unlike most Maine landscape paintings. Walker's Maine tidal

JOHN WALKER Expressionist in Mud

cove paintings were shown at Bowdoin College Museum of Art in 2001 and at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockport in 2003.

"One is always terribly inhibited by scenic qualities, if you will," says Walker, explaining why it took him so many years to begin making Maine paintings. "It's all too damn beautiful, so it took me a long time to find something that interested me."

And what interested Walker was the mud and the forms made by the comings and goings of the tides.

"It was unromantic enough to interest me," says Walker, noting that paint itself is only "colored mud."

In a recent series of Maine paintings, Walker focused on the marks clambers leave in the flats, conjuring in these muddy scars the same intensity of feeling he earlier brought to paintings inspired by his

father's experiences of the First World War, itself a record of violence in mud.

Walker's war elegies are more completely abstract paintings evocative of the physical horrors his father suffered during World War I. They are paintings about slaughter, the half-human figures having the heads of lambs and the surface of the paintings covered in the poetry of the First World War.

John Walker's Maine paintings contain the recognizable residue of the coastal landscape — horizon, islands, water, rocks, mud, but the landscape is abstracted in that the paintings are as much about the paint on the canvas as they are about the cove before his eyes. The handling of the paint is energetic and free even as the colors are primarily dark and dirty, leaving an impression as heavy as any fugue.

"I do feel very strongly that what I'm painting is what I'm seeing," says Walker, "but even when the forms are abstract, there is always an attempt to somehow relate them to some sort of humanness."