

# Portland Press Herald

ARTS REVIEW >

## Art review: Diversity of contemporary art scene demonstrated by 3 shows

They're up for the next few weeks at Grant Wahlquist and Zero Station galleries in Portland and George Marshall Store Gallery in York.

BY JORGE S. ARANGO

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Benjamin Hawley, "Collected Firmament," 2022, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches *Courtesy of the artist and Grant Wahlquist Gallery, Maine*

## :: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

“Benjamin Hawley: All this and not ordinary” at Grant Wahlquist Gallery (through May 20), “A More Human Dwelling Place” at George Marshall Store Gallery in York (through May 28) and “Holdfast” (through June 8) at Zero Station Gallery are entirely distinct shows, but considered together, they demonstrate the richness and diversity of Maine’s contemporary art scene.

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### IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** “Benjamin Hawley: All this and not ordinary”  
**WHERE:** Grant Wahlquist Gallery, 30 City Center, 2nd Floor, Portland  
**WHEN:** Through May 20  
**HOURS:** 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday (by appointment other days)  
**ADMISSION:** Free  
**INFO:** 207-245-5732, [grantwahlquist.com](http://grantwahlquist.com)

**WHAT:** “Surf Point Foundation Selects: A More Human Dwelling Place”  
**WHERE:** George Marshall Store Gallery, 140 Lindsay Road, York  
**WHEN:** Through May 28  
**HOURS:** 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday through Sunday and by appointment  
**ADMISSION:** Free  
**INFO:** 207-351-8200, [georgemarshallstoregallery.com](http://georgemarshallstoregallery.com)

**WHAT:** “Holdfast”  
**WHERE:** Zero Station, 222 Anderson St., Portland  
**WHEN:** Through June 8  
**HOURS:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday  
**ADMISSION:** Free  
**INFO:** 207-347-7000, [zerostation.com](http://zerostation.com)

There’s something so formally elegant about Hawley’s paintings that they seem more typical of a mature sensibility and a well-seasoned artist’s commitment to uncompromising conceptual rigor. (He’s in his mid-20s.) The show’s title comes from the opening lines of a Gertrude Stein poem, “Tender Buttons.” To paraphrase her meaning, Hawley spins gold out of objects we often dismiss as quotidian – a bowl, steam rising out of an opening, a curve of counter – illustrating just how extraordinary they can be.

Consider “Collected Firmament.” It is ostensibly an oil painting of a bowl. But it seems otherworldly in the way it levitates in midair. You apprehend its shadow on the surface around it, but the surface itself doesn’t really feel like a “firmament” at all; rather, it is like some void. Its shape and contour are clearly defined, and its glaze appears glossy enough to reflect light. But there is no obvious light source.

Hawley, who hails from Boston, faithfully renders the bowl as an object, but it exists within an enigmatic space.

Most paintings verge on abstraction, mere references to something – sometimes clear, sometimes not. A prime example is “Whenever I see it, I still think about what you said and laugh a little,” a painting that is little more than a line, upturned at the ends like a smile, floating in a deep cerulean ground.

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Benjamin Hawley, "Whenever I see it, I still think about what you said and I laugh a little," 2023, oil on canvas, 32 x 48 inches  
*Courtesy of the artist and Grant Wahlquist Gallery, Maine*

What is this object that is advancing toward us? The rim of a disc or plate moving through nothingness? We don't know. But, like the objects in "Sky Mound" and "Full," it possesses a palpable sense of emergence, of forms manifesting out of some mysterious unmanifest infinity.

Strange as it may sound, Hawley's paintings invoked Vermeer for me. Not that they are anywhere near as literal. But one of the astonishing – and most confounding – things about Vermeer is our helplessness to discern a single brushstroke in his work.

Brushstroke iterates movement and energy and acknowledges the presence of the artist in a work. The lack of brushstroke in Vermeer's oeuvre makes his subjects and interiors appear like apparitions somehow out of time or, because era and locale are identifiable, suspended in time and susceptible to instantly dissolving again into nothing but molecules of light. It's what gives them their ineffable quality of silence and stillness.

Time and space have paused to merely observe a very specific millisecond along a continuum.

## :: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

Very occasionally, you can identify Hawley's brush. But mostly somehow he erases it – with a roller, for example, or by blotting strokes away with cloth. This obliterates the paintings' authorship and sense of fixedness in space. Look long enough at a painting like “Whenever I see it” and you may find yourself losing the sense of your own body, as if this unidentifiable object draws you inexorably into the cerulean expanse from which it's emerging, swallowing your selfhood whole.

Absence of brushwork is particularly effective in “Into Thin Air,” which conveys vapor arising from a round opening. We can't tell what the opening is. It could be a pot boiling on a stove, a steaming manhole cover in winter, a caldera spewing sulphureous fumes. This could variously imply something homey, urban or toxic. The power of this reductiveness lies in leaving you dangling somewhere between knowing and unknowing, clarity and conundrum.

Also like Vermeer, Hawley's colors have an inner luminosity to them. I'm not sure what accounts for that, but they give the distinct impression that we are looking at light, not just a recognizable substance like oil paint. Many display airbrushed-like ombrés that ripple from top to bottom of each canvas, contributing to the ephemerality of what we are seeing, as if their forms, like a color's saturation, can slowly fade out.

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