

# :: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

## Maine Sunday Telegram

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT Posted 4:00 AM

### Bold, playful Pop love graces new Portland gallery

See Karen Lederer's 'Cheeto Fish' at the bright white Grant Wahlquist Gallery.

BY DANIEL KANY

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"Fish Bowl"

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Grant Wahlquist Gallery is a new venue at 30 City Center in Portland. The long spindly staircase up to the second floor glows white. The gallery itself glows even whiter, like a throwback scene from the future from “2001: A Space Odyssey” or, maybe right now at least, “A Clockwork Orange.”

The all-white space is lit with full-range fluorescents and LEDs. It’s the whitest of all white-box galleries. It works. (And I think I even got a bit of tan during my visit.)

It works particularly well for Karen Lederer’s art: pulsing Pop paintings largely executed with print techniques. At first glance, they look like a room of studies that Pop artist James Rosenquist might have made for a remake of Henri Matisse’s super famous 1911 goldfish painting in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow.

Lederer’s intimately scaled, tabletop Pop still lifes generally use flat, bold colors to give us scenes of very red goldfish in their bowls; loud orange Cheetos in their own vessels; playful plants, and electric-jumpy David Hockney-ish tablecloths.

Lederer makes her Matisse connection loud and clear with a reproduction on a mug of the seminal 1910 “Dance II” at the Hermitage which is like (but not quite) the full-scale sketch for “Dance” at the Museum of Modern Art.

“Cheeto Zen” (2014) depicts a flat pink hand (accurately outlined, though flat within) grabbing Cheetos from a black-and-white bowl on a table with a blue-and-white-checked tablecloth. On the back of the table is a plant in a low yellow vessel. The plant is also made of monoprinted popsicle sticks that don’t connect into a single structure as they reach up through the top of the scene.



“Cheeto Zen”

The wit of the work comes from the unrealistic plant’s lack of connectedness when compared to the singular solidity of the hand: The hand isn’t solid as a hand but as a single flat color, which denies it volume. To underscore the joke, Lederer includes a shadow under the hand. But it doesn’t stop there. The fingers are like the Cheetos (and vice versa) and we do notice a shift in the color of the hand. It’s not modeling, but the orangey dust from the Cheetos on the fingers of the munching artist.

It’s a simple thing, easy to see. But if you want to take it further, you can. There is a famous Matisse image of a goldfish, for example, in which Matisse had originally included himself. But he painted out his own figure with the exception of his unpainted palette and thumb. This might sound like a stretch, but after spending time with Lederer’s works, it won’t feel like it. If we can joke about van Gogh’s ear, why not bowls of Matisse’s thumbs?

While you can take Lederer’s wit as far as you want, most of it is accessible and geared toward playfulness rather than arcane references.

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"Staring Contest" Photos courtesy of Karen Lederer and Grant Wahlquist Gallery

"Staring Contest" (2015), for example, sets the "Wood-Owl Woman" vase to look at the fishbowl. Maybe it's a Matisse versus Picasso thing (which is funny, as they were competitors, not friends) or maybe it's a joke about how the rendering of the fish staring at the vase is not a fish and a vessel but two parts of the same painting stuck in perpetuity. Or it could be that a vase can't stare, but a fish can. You could speculate on and on.

The most obvious aspect of Lederer's work is her use of print techniques in combination with painting and drawing techniques.

There are stencils, literal objects, monoprints and literally painted passages. You could follow this in a technical conversation, which, for members of say, Portland's Peregrine Press, could be fun. But for most of us, the print techniques are simply how Lederer makes her paintings. The implications are more aesthetic and philosophical than technical.

The mass-produced Picassos and Matisse's, after all, have to be rendered by hand. But the fishbowl plants, Cheetos or other elements, can be printed. And printing, of course, touches on our Instagram culture, in which nothing is an original but is all about copies and universal access. (So, yeah, maybe there is a reason for referencing the Russia-based art that we can all recognize – we've not been to see them in the flesh, after all, and yet we still know what they are.)

To me, it feels like Lederer is doing a Pop Art reboot with its hat tipped to late Cubism, also known as Synthetic Cubism, which essentially made an inventory of paintings' tools: flat color, bright color, trompe l'oeil shadows, collage (which was invented in Cubism), recognizable patterns, artificial textures, synecdoche (part for the whole), modeling, printing techniques and so on. Great Cubist wit has included pictures of a newspaper, which in French is "journal," only showing part of the word – "jour," which means "day," or sometimes "jou," which means "play."

So, it's not by chance that Lederer shows us the French title of her à la mode sparkling water: "La Croix." The real wit, however, is easier to sense: La Croix is extremely popular right now, so, like a newspaper, it has a truly ephemeral sense of timeliness.

"Sunset" (2017) features a can of La Croix set next to a bowl of Cheetos. Cheetos certainly are a sunset color, but there's no doubt Lederer is joking about the somewhat passé snack and its ascending companion, which someday, too, shall pass.



"Solo Dance"

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Ironically enough, Lederer herself fits into this conversation about what's new, fresh, hip, fashionable or ascending. Lederer is a Brooklyn artist (and you're supposed to say, "Aren't they all from Brooklyn these days?") who has gotten some press, but this is only her second solo exhibition – and it's in Portland, Maine.

Don't let Wahlquist's unusual space fool you: Lederer's work is surrounded by that of like-minded companions in exhibitions elsewhere in the area.

Adriane Herman's "Wreckage Salad" was a terrific show at Ocean House Gallery (which came down in August) with similar insights about piles of junk and recognizable objects.

Able Baker Contemporary's self-portrait group show (up through Sept. 30) shares aesthetics and concerns about Pop Art multiplicities.

And guest curator John Bisbee's "MidToast" at Elizabeth Moss Galleries (up through Sept. 16) features a range of midcoast artists who engage in similar veins of wit and engagement with art history.

While Mainers have spilled ink and tears lamenting the recent loss of some of our leading venues, much has happened. And there seems to be plenty of space for well-made contemporary art that is playful, smart and fun.

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## ART REVIEW

**WHAT:** "Cheeto Fish" by Karen Lederer

**WHERE:** Grant Wahlquist Gallery, 30 City Center, 2nd floor, Portland

**WHEN:** 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday to Saturday; through Sept. 22

**INFO:** 245-5732, [grantwahlquist.com](http://grantwahlquist.com)

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