

# :: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

## Portland Press Herald

**Q&A: His Maine debut postponed, Leon Benn talks painting process and new priorities**

By Stacey Kors, April 5, 2020



One would think that a stay-at-home order wouldn't be too disruptive to artist Leon Benn, already a stay-at-home dad with an in-house studio. But homeschooling his kindergarten-age daughter while his wife, Julie, the creative director at L.L. Bean, is working upstairs in a makeshift office, hasn't left him much time to paint. It's also severely limited Benn's time outside, which is where the former landscaper derives much of the inspiration for his colorful, highly textural art.

Benn's most recent body of work was supposed to be on view right now at Portland's Grant Wahlquist Gallery—his first solo show in Maine since moving here five years ago—but the coronavirus put this career milestone on hold. I spoke with the 38-year-old, Portland-based artist about his practice, postponed exhibit, and art in the age of COVID-19 during his daily two-hour window of opportunity—when his one-and-a-half-year-old girl naps.

**Q: Your paintings have a very distinct style to them, almost like a contemporary riff on Post-Impressionism or Fauvism. Can you tell me a little about your artistic process?**

**A:** I usually work on linen or canvas, like cotton duck. I make a dye bath and soak the fabric overnight, and when I wash it out the next day I'll have a really nice, uniform vibrant color to use as a starting point for the painting. I then do a process called faux batik.

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Unlike genuine batik, which involves melting wax, this is a water-based resist that you can draw with and it will harden on the surface, and you can then add liquid dyes in and among the lines you drew to create shapes. It gives it a nice watercolor feel. Then I wash it out, stretch the canvas and prime it, and finish off the painting with pastels, oil paint and acrylics to build upon the existing image and colors and play with the texture.

My process also employs contemporary tools like Photoshop. I take a picture of the painting after it's been batiked and then upload the image onto my computer and digitally draw over it to give myself a starting map of how I want to arrange forms and marks over the canvas. The marks made from drawing with the mousepad very much mimic the marks I make either with a brush or palette knife.

**Q: While you primarily paint landscapes, you sometimes feature figures in your work as well. What can we look forward to seeing in your show “Gardening Techniques” when Grant Wahlquist reopens?**

**A:** Those paintings started with a series of landscape drawings that I did in and around Portland of bushes and shrubs leaning against people's houses or against architectural barriers, like fences and buildings. That's how I interact with the landscape — finding these random, unknown spots. I'm not looking for that traditional “romantic” view; I'm just wandering around and stumbling onto these things that are often not regarded as beautiful.

The exhibit is named after a large painting titled “Gardening Techniques.” It's the only work in the series that has a figure. I worked for a long time as a landscaper and continue working part time at a landscaping nursery, so there's an autobiographical aspect to it. It's an odd painting of this ghostlike figure raking within this fantastical made-up landscape of forms that I got out of textbooks of ancient plants that existed in the world before animals and dinosaurs.

What I'm hinting at is that the plants we see around us are a sort of testament to our own evolution, and finding the language of the landscape equal to the language of painting. The way I look at the landscape evolved, and then the painting evolved.

**Q: It must be pretty disappointing to have to postpone your debut to the Portland art community.**

**A:** I'm definitely crestfallen after putting in the effort to showcase my work in my first solo show in the city. This show is about things I relate to in the Portland area, which is the landscape. We moved here from Brooklyn, and I just fell in love with the landscape in Maine. I know other artists are inspired by it as well. I was looking forward to having that conversation.

But, to be honest, I'm not as worried about myself as much as I am for all the galleries and institutions that will suffer the economic aftermath. They are the caretakers of, and homes for, artists and their work, and there's so much uncertainty now about the future

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of the art market. I'm fortunate to be in a happy marriage with a great family and a supportive wife; I do sell my artwork, but I'd definitely not survive off that alone.

**Q: Do you think this temporary shutdown will have a long-term impact on how we, as a culture, consume art?**

**A:** It seems like galleries, museums, and nonprofits are all coming up with some creative ideas to showcase art online, which is great as far as adapting to this new normal. So in a way, I think there's a lot of positive things that are going to come about as far as how artists adapt and how galleries adapt. As far as the physical viewing of artwork goes—coming into a space to see a painting, a sculpture, a photograph—I don't think that's going to change. Being inspired together and enjoying a show together is really important for us as a culture and as a community.

**Q: Aside from the constraints put on your creative time by increased parenting, how has the current situation influenced your approach to making art?**

**A:** My routine has been shaken up dramatically, but I'm kind of psyched about that, because I think it's important for an artist to go through phases where you need to adapt, to change gear and slow down what you're doing. I've been forced to take my mind away from the studio and deal with all these other important things in life, like my children, and my mom whom I helped move here recently. I've also been thinking about making paintings for friends and loved ones who could use some art in this strange time.

I'm hoping that we can still have the show opening in the beginning of May — everything is so uncertain at this point. But I intend to make paintings even if the show doesn't happen. For me it's all about being inspired and making the work. That's not going anywhere.