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Carl Little – Leon Benn: Relinquishing Collective Grief

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:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

Painter Leon Benn has described himself as a “transcriber of drawings and visions pertaining to the landscape.” In *Gardening Techniques*, his first solo show at Grant Wahlquist (3 June–23 August 2020), Benn followed through on that self-designation with bravado, offering ten paintings, all dated 2020, that relate to various flora and that are flush with abundant color.

If the show’s title conjures how-to illustrations, rest assured Benn’s transcriptions are anything but technical. They are verdant energy fields. The title painting shows a cartoon outline of a woman handling a tined rake amidst what looks like tropical foliage. The image is almost trippy in its profusion of color and fantastic shrubberies, like something out of *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*.

Benn achieves elaborate layered effects through a multi-step process that starts with drawings of plants and trees found in and around his home in Portland and ends with a surface filled with fluid marks, loosely geometric forms, and impasto elements. In between, according to the gallery, he dyes linen using acrylic washes or a Batik-like process, sometimes adding a “fuzzy” oil stick layer. The result is something of a visual smorgasbord.



Leon Benn, *Gardening Techniques*, oil, oil pastel, acrylic, and fabric dye on linen, 84 x 62 in. 2020.

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The bulk of the work in the show, Benn notes, “derives from a couple days of biking around my neighborhood (the Parkside, Libbytown, West End, and Western Promenade neighborhoods of Portland Maine) in the late summer, last year.” He took photos of spaces he found to be “communicative of a weird quiet kind of space, akin to the chaotic, yet orderly balance found in Japanese garden temples.”

While Benn references specific species in his titles, the paintings veer away from the botanical. In *South Portland Arborvitae*, the flattened branchlets of the evergreen may be recognizable, but the painter has heightened the tree’s color and expressive contours, turning it into a glorious mass that partially blocks a house in the background. Likewise, the splendid specimen in *Dense Form Weeping Alaskan* resembles a Christmas tree on steroids.



Leon Benn, *Dense Form Weeping Alaskan*, oil, oil pastel, acrylic, and fabric dye on linen, 60 x 40 in., 2020.

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Vines, Bunker Brewery was among the most engaging pieces in the show by virtue of its inventive rendering of tangled plants climbing the wall of a Portland beer business. Much of the canvas is taken up by a crazy patchwork of small colorful outlined leaf forms, with a hint of a roofline above and fence and yard below.

"I found that the buildings and the way the shrubs, and trees and other plants were growing up and around the structures were evidence of another narrative being played out, one devoid of humans," Benn writes. He liked the idea that the plants "somehow were boundless and unaware of the surrounding chaos of humanity, their political and cultural wars, yet so present at the same time."

In this respect, Benn sees his work as a kind of call to action. He believes that humankind is entirely responsible for climate change so when he makes these "plant-centric" landscapes, he hopes to "instill some sort of reverence towards our earth and the respect that should exist for it." He wants to create "a sense of happiness and wonderment as a place to begin any sort of action." He finds the world to be a dark place, especially now; "I can't help but think that people want to be... relinquishing some collective grief through art that is uplifting."



Leon Benn, *Vines, Bunker Brewery*, oil, oil pastel, acrylic, and fabric dye on linen, 36 x 29 in., 2020.

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Born in Philadelphia in 1981, Benn remembers spending time in nearby Fairmount Park, a 2,000-acre refuge in the heart of the city. He found it “kind of an ideal setting for a curious person like me to wander down to the creek and explore all the variations and textures of rocks and plants, and form these imaginative stories within that setting.”

While earning a BFA in illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design in the early 2000s, Benn made plein-air watercolors. He also spent a year in Italy as part of the European Honors Program. “Seeing some of the world’s most incredible artworks intimately,” he recalls, “was a highly profound experience, in addition to the ancient Roman ruins.”

After RISD, Benn moved to New York City, where he worked for artist Adam Cvijanovic on his large-scale paintings. Eventually, he established an interior design studio and freelanced full-time as a mural specialist and faux finisher. He developed brushwork skills while making photorealistic paintings of landscapes (like Central Park) and Bernini sculptures. He also worked as a scenic painter in the fashion industry, creating forest scenes for various photoshoots.

After being turned down for a number of residencies and graduate schools, Benn finally got accepted to UCLA. In the MFA program, he found his voice while working with some “amazing, influential artists.” Grad school proved to be an “incredibly engaging and adventurous time” that resulted in “a sort of quixotic feeling of unrestrained experimentation.” He made photos with slide film of desert time-lapses of “shimmery moonlighted rocks” and tried to “re-emulate” these optical sensory experiences with paint. He also made paintings in a constructed black-out room, “to paint memories as if in virtual reality.”

Benn also found support from his French wife Julie Mattei-Benn, a graphic designer whose critical eye has strengthened his “resolve as a visual thinker.” A summer trip to Morocco to visit her parents left an indelible impression on him, “not only the striking beauty of the land but its people and their crafts.”

While there, Benn met a master weaver in Rabat in the central souk and purchased fabric made out of linen and polyester that the artist thought would work well with dye experiments he had started in graduate school. It was, he says, the beginning of his current technical process.

Benn and his family, which includes Georgia, 6, and Anouk, 2, moved to Portland five years ago when Julie landed a creative director position at L. L. Bean. While his wife continues to work full-time, he has been tending to the children, who have been “greatly influential” to his process. “I see the joy and freedom in the drawings that they make, and it reinforces for me the universal viability of art.”

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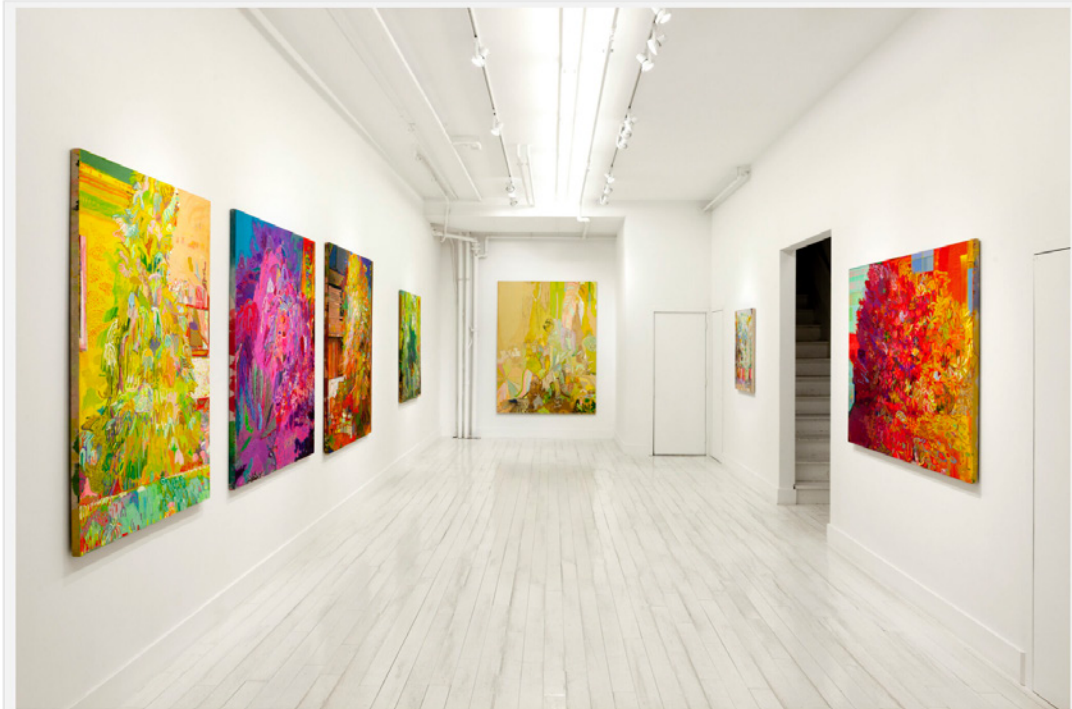


Georgia Benn drawing in her father's basement studio.

The pandemic has put a dent in Benn's studio time due to home-schooling and other responsibilities. While experiencing some challenging emotional moments of stress and frustration, he has managed to be productive, working on preparatory things like building stretcher bars and dyeing fabrics, "so that hopefully when both kids can be in school full-time, I will have at my disposal canvases ready to go!"

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The exhibition at Grant Wahlquist, delayed as it was, turned out to be a blessing. Benn credits the “resilient gallerist” with helping to keep his confidence in maintaining his artistic practice during the global catastrophe. “His intelligence within the contemporary art world has been a bright spot for me,” Benn writes, “especially in navigating a new place.”



Installation shot of *Gardening Techniques* at Grant Wahlquist Gallery

To the question, “Is your art leading you with deeply thoughtful reflections about ‘where do we go from here?’” Benn responds, “not exactly.” He hopes Donald Trump is not re-elected and that as a country “we can make better choices for our children and the planet.”

Looking ahead, Benn feels “a new kind of abstract playfulness” might arise from the pandemic shut-down. He would love to continue making work that explores abstract natural textures, “like drawing from closely examined lichen and turning that into a monumental canvas could be cool!”

Protecting each other from the virus and “doing our best to uphold the safety of the community” are of utmost importance. Benn is hopeful that in the near future “we will all win this battle and get back to doing things we love and seeing music shows and having celebrations.” He believes people will come out of this “stronger and wiser.” Amen to that.

[This piece drew on a review written for *Art New England* in March when the magazine stopped publishing. Thanks to Leon Benn for responding to my questions and to Grant Wahlquist for mounting his exhibition in the midst of the pandemic. For more on Benn’s process, read Stacey Kors’s [interview with him](#).]

Image at top: Leon Benn, *South Portland Arborvitae*, oil, oil pastel, acrylic, and fabric dye on linen, 66 x 54 in. 2020.