

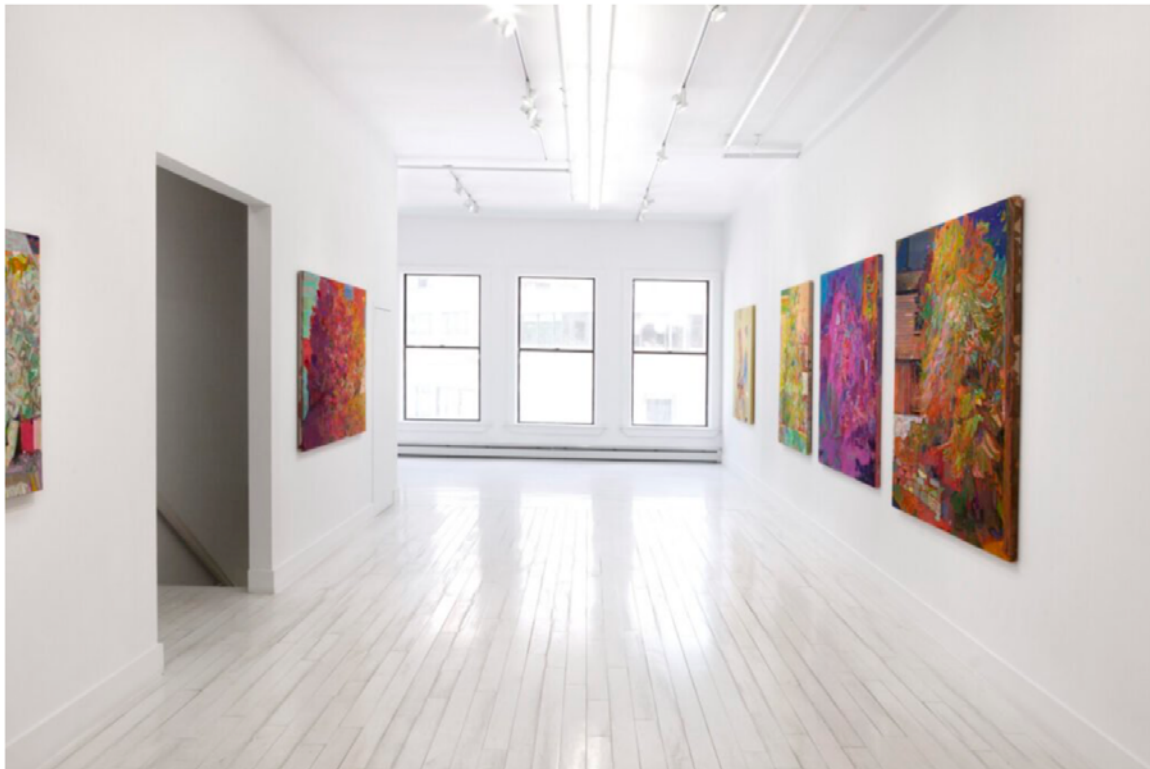
Portland Press Herald

Art review: Leon Benn paintings capture the lushness of summer in the city

The exhibit runs through Aug. 22 at Grant Wahlquist Gallery in Portland.

BY STACEY KORS

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Leon Benn's solo exhibit, "Gardening Techniques," at Grant Wahlquist Gallery in Portland. *Photo courtesy of the artist and Grant Wahlquist Gallery*

Stepping into "Gardening Techniques," the Leon Benn exhibit at Grant Wahlquist Gallery, it's hard not to feel like Dorothy when she opens the door of Auntie Em's farmhouse and finds herself transported from her black-and-white world in Kansas to the Technicolor land of Oz.

:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

ART REVIEW

WHAT: "Leon Benn: Gardening Techniques"

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

WHEN: Through Aug. 22

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday (8 p.m. on the first Friday of each month during exhibitions) and by appointment

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: (207) 245-5732, info@grantwahlquist.com

Facing the gallery entrance are three large plant portraits born from Benn's wanderings around the Portland area in late summer. Awash in kaleidoscopic color schemes and concentrated, highly textural brushwork, the pieces are vibrant and visceral, suggestive not only of the density and lushness of summer foliage, but of the heady physicality of the season, the colors of familiar surroundings recalibrated to capture the totality of summer's sensory experience.

Bathed in a peachy glow, the titular drooping evergreen in "Dense Form Weeping Alaskan" cascades with color, the mixture of soft pastels and vivid yellows and greens evoking the changing light of a summer morning. "West End Weeping Willow" is resplendent in purples, magentas and reds, its delicate branches bowing low to the unabashed ostentation. With its flush of rusts, golds and oranges climbing towards a deep blue sky, "South Portland Arbor Vitae" is redolent of a late-night bonfire.



"Dense Form Weeping Alaskan,"
by Leon Benn *Photo courtesy of
the artist and Grant Wahlquist
Gallery*

Just as Oz isn't what it seems on its surface, the visually ravishing works in "Gardening Techniques," Benn's first solo show since [moving to Portland five years ago](#), reward deeper investigation. Having worked as a landscaper, Benn is equally versed in the languages of nature and art, his paintings often setting up layered dialogues between them. These works are not so much a romantic homage to nature with a capital N as they are a reflection of Benn's personal experiences uncovering beauty in untraditional landscapes.

Trees, shrubs and vines may be the subjects of these late-summer studies, of which there are several in this exhibit, but their stories unfold through the houses, commercial buildings and walls that harbor them. Rendered flatly, they act as physical backdrops, providing further dimensionality and a sense of place; they are also architectural barriers, and, as such, act as conceptual vehicles for Benn to explore the relationship between the natural world and the manmade. He finds beauty in the symbiosis.

:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

It's no surprise, then, that Benn takes inspiration from the early 20th-century art movements of French Fauvism and German Expressionism, where the use of brilliant, unnatural hues and fluid, gestural marks reflects the emotional, rather than visual, experience of the artist.

But while Expressionism suggests a certain spontaneity of creation, the impact of Benn's work stems from a deeply intricate, multimedia practice. Working on linen and cotton duck, Benn first soaks the fabric in an immersion dye to create a uniform, vibrant background color. He then employs a process he refers to as faux batik – using a water-based, rather than wax-based, resist to draw on the dyed surface – after which he adds liquid dyes in and around the drawn lines to create shapes. Once the resist and dyes are washed out, Benn builds on the existing image with pastels, oils and acrylics, playing with color temperatures and textural effects. Marble dust is sometimes mixed into the paint, as is mica dust, which lends a subtle iridescence to works like “August Overgrowth, Bunker Brewery,” a rich, Rousseauvian urban jungle with a slightly shimmery, dark green center that draws the eye in.

:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY



"August Overgrowth, Bunker Brewery," by Leon Benn *Photo courtesy of the artist and Grant Wahlquist Gallery*

:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

Not all of the work in “Gardening Techniques” stems from local landscapes. In Benn’s three most recent pieces, which includes the exhibit’s title painting, the artist uses scientific textbook illustrations of prehistoric plants and fossils to draw an evolutionary through-line between the extinct and the extant. Employing the form of the still life, “Paleozoic Plants” is a twist on the traditional floral centerpiece, the typical roses and lilies replaced by ancient plants and fossil forms. “Gardening Techniques,” the largest painting in the show and the only one to contain a figure, features a ghost-like form raking a primeval forest floor of ferns, corals and anemones.

Paler in palette and flatter in style, these works lack the immediacy and intensity of the summer series. Nor are they similarly anchored in three-dimensional space: far more of the dyed fabric background – in both cases a dull gold – is left exposed, causing the subjects to float on the canvas. Given the content, these differences are doubtless intentional; it’s difficult, however, not to judge these pieces in the context of the surrounding work—and Benn’s years of perfecting his dramatic, deeply layered landscape technique.

“Protoflora Forms,” the final work Benn created for the show, starts to close the gap. Less densely textured and grounded than Benn’s other landscapes, the painting nonetheless conveys depth of field through its contrasting color play and collage of overlapping shapes, which suggest mountainous land masses pushing out from the earth’s primordial, plant-filled soup. As with our planet’s plantscape, there is an interesting evolution occurring in Benn’s work. With such a noteworthy solo show debut, it is decidedly one worth following.

Stacey Kors is a longtime arts writer and editor who lives on Peaks Island.



"Paleozoic Plants," by Leon Benn Photo courtesy of the artist and Grant Wahlquist Gallery