

Art review: Chairs take on many meanings in mixed-media show

'Some Reliable Truths About Chairs' features sculpture, painting, collage and photography.

BY DANIEL KANY



"Dinner Party (Porch)" by Claire Seidl, gelatin silver photograph, 2014, 23 by 23 inches. Photo courtesy of Claire Seidl

"Some Reliable Truths About Chairs" is the result of curator (and painter) Janice Moore's obsession with chairs. It is not a design show, but rather a fine art feast plated with playful wit and garnished with some choice sprigs of philosophy. It features sculpture, paintings, collages and photographs – but no usable chairs.

The Union of Maine Visual Artists Gallery at the Portland Media Center on Congress Street has been a hotbed of activity over the past two years with mixed, though ever-improving, results. Moore, who was joined by erstwhile curator of the University of Southern Maine's Atrium Gallery Robyn Holman as the guest juror, has mounted a smart and entertaining show with a strong mix of rising talents and well-established professionals.

Some of the art follows straight-forward depictions of chairs: Harold Garde's works from the 1980s are particularly notable for their success as strong paintings. Other works are humorous scenes observed in real life, such as Dave Wade's "Hotseat" (an infrared red chair in the snow) and Lesley McVane's "Out of Order," which smartly plays the double entendre (the literal order of numbers and the idea of a sign conveying "this thing is broken") with a street snap view of numbered chairs not quite aligned by the numbers painted on them. And there is a surprising body of work that goes deep on philosophical considerations. The chair has long played a rhetorical role in Western philosophy: More than 2,000 years ago, Plato used the chair to explain his understanding of "truth": Any specific chair is merely an illustration of the "ideal Form," which, for Platonists, is the "true reality." (I am assuming Plato is the ultimate source of the "truths" in the exhibition title.)

But beyond Plato's essentialism, chairs have played some very unusual conceptual roles over the centuries of Western culture. They can be markers of poverty (e.g., Vincent van Gogh's self-portrait as a simple three-legged stool) or power (thrones), but they are also used as markers of absence; an empty chair means someone isn't there. And this topic is poignantly considered throughout the show. Natasha Mayers conflates the notion of "empty suit" with the emptiness of chairs in her creepily brilliant "Chair People." Lauren O'Neal's "Stage" treats piled chairs in an elevator as pieces on a stage – uncannily uncomfortable because they are uninhabitable. And this logic is reinforced by Ann Tracy's "Homage to Ionesco," a wall assemblage with piles of tiny chairs – doubly unusable because of their vertical orientation on the wall. Tracy's homage directly references the French playwright's 1952 absurdist masterpiece, "The Chairs." (In French, it's "Les Chaises," and I am fascinated by the fact that "chair" means "flesh" in French.) It's a brutal, post-apocalyptic play in which an "Old Man" and an "Old Woman" (the anti-Adam and Eve) prepare chairs for a gathering. An Orator is going to explain the Old Man's discovery, which we come to assume is something like the ultimate Truth. But the world, it seems, is at its end (as opposed to its Biblical beginning). Invisible guests arrive and the couple commits suicide because, well, life couldn't get any better. And then the Orator arrives and he is, unexpectedly, an actual actor. But we come to find he's a deaf mute. Language, before an empty audience, is therefore dead and what Ionesco presses is this palpable sense of absence – the void. What goes up, maybe, must come down.

Janice Moore's "Industrial Maine" at the Atrium Gallery this past spring marked her excellent debut as a curator. And she has surpassed that mark with "Some Reliable Truths about Chairs."

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