

Art review: Corey Daniels carves out room for two shows at Wells gallery

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By Jorge S. Arango

One is packed from floor to ceiling, the other a pairing of sublime stillness and abstract energy.

Earlier this summer, I reported that Corey Daniels had stopped hanging specific shows at his always-intriguing namesake gallery in Wells. Daniels is still iconoclastic about the whole enterprise, perhaps because his tastes are so far-ranging, his curiosity practically promiscuous and his gallery rooms so large and rambling that pulling it into any kind of narrative order is a challenge.

Nevertheless, Daniels has carved out a show, “Jenny Brillhart and Claire Seidl,” in one of the large rooms and another, “New Work from Gallery Artists,” that occupies pretty much the rest of the place. Both run through Oct. 9.

“New Work” is a lot to digest. Go with a good hour at least. It is different from this gallerist’s usual presentations in that many works, though not all, are now identified with wall texts, and also because, spectacularly, the room directly in front of you as you enter the door is hung gallery style from floor to ceiling. That means there’s a lot of art in this high-ceilinged gallery. The sheer quantity of work will take your breath away.

On the left wall is a stunning mix of mostly two-dimensional works. As your eyes scan across and up and down the vertical surface, you’ll variously encounter cool geometric abstraction (Michelle Caron, Duane Paluska), softer texturally layered abstraction (Laura Duerwald, Tom Gaines), graphite works that create evocative plays of light and shadow (Munira Naqui), Jung Hur’s rhythmic paintings of keyholes and horseshoes, photography (Cole Caswell’s grounded boat is a melancholic highlight) and more surrealistically representational images (Eben Haines).

On the other side of the room is a selection of sculpture on walls, tables and the floor. This includes the intriguingly volumetric metal box grids of Bill Zingaro, with undulating hammered surfaces that juxtapose fluidity with the stiffness of the material; Lynn Duryea’s devotional-looking totemic figures of stacked terra cotta elements, wood, oxidized metal and grinding wheels; James Bradley Marshall’s constructions of paper bags dipped in plaster and covered in graphite; Peter Bennett’s sheet metal collages; and Sharon Townshend’s ceramic wall pieces that appear as wavy cascades of birch bark.

The room is a tour de force of abundance. There’s nothing to do but surrender.

Upstairs, one gallery illustrates Daniels’s ability to elevate quotidian objects to the level of art. Mostly black and white works by Jeff Kellar ring the loft space. Tom Cowgill’s otherworldly sculptures “Four Ways to Resemble St. Teresa” share the floor with two armchairs stripped to their wood-and-canvas-strap construction (save for some muslin upholstery on their seats and backs). In this context, it is clear that the chairs are not merely functional objects, but sculptural presences. There’s no other gallery in Maine that I know of where this happens, and it feels exciting and mind-opening to witness, an entirely new way of seeing.

The Brillhart-Seidl pairing is another thing altogether. On the far wall of this gallery hang Brillhart’s sublime paintings depicting various tableaux of incongruous objects arranged within empty rooms. These works are about light, silence and stillness. The chalky whites and grays in these paintings glow with a soft, pale daylight reminiscent of Vermeer.

Like many Vermeers – or, for that matter, innumerable kinds of art, from ancient Chinese ink-painted landscapes to Mark Rothko’s floating fields of color to Doug Wheeler’s light installations – the silence and stillness in these rooms feels palpable. We feel suspended in transcendental spaces in which time seems to have stopped and the world seems far, far away. In a way, these paintings recall the words of Pablo Neruda’s poem “Keeping Quiet”:

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.

The stillness these paintings emanate is eternal, especially because the objects in them are stripped of practical function, losing their earthly purpose and obliterating their temporality. Sinks stand on their sides, paintings are hung facing the wall and giving us their backs, chairs are stacked on top of each other or toppled over. They are not sad or melancholy; they are just stillness being stillness.



On the opposite wall, Claire Seidl’s abstract paintings pulse with movement and energy. They can be contemplative too, but in a different way. After all, “Art,” as Susan Sontag wrote in her diaries, “is a form of consciousness.” Rather than stillness, these works seemingly channel the rhythms of the natural world. Where Brillhart’s transmit emptiness and depth of space, Seidl’s can mostly be summed up in the title of one work: “In and of Itself.” They are densely layered with color and with textures achieved through the use of brushes, printing brayers, spatulas and palette knives.

With few exceptions, all the action is on the surface rather than beneath it. They are frankly and simply what they are. Occasionally they can recall the nature Seidl sees outside her Rangeley studio. “Day In Day Out,” for instance, might appear like light dappling through branches of a tree canopy.

Seidl’s paintings are spontaneous, not premeditated in any way. They feel personal to her emotional and mental state in their moment. We cannot decipher that state precisely; just feel the energy of them, which seems heightened when contrasted with the stillness on the opposite wall.

Two photos by Seidl seem to bridge the divide between her paintings and Brillhart’s. They are enigmatic selenium-toned silver gelatin prints in which she has layered images. Figures in them seem ghostly, almost like spirits passing through the rooms rather than inhabiting them. Read from Seidl’s paintings to Brillhart’s, one senses a narrative that starts with some sort of primordial energy, continues through the ephemeral timeline blip of a human life, and ends in the eternal silence and stillness of Brillhart’s rooms.

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IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Jenny Brillhart and Claire Seidl” and “New Work from Gallery Artists”

WHERE: Corey Daniels Gallery, 2208 Post Road, Wells

WHEN: Through Oct. 9

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, or by chance or appointment

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-646-5301, coreydanielsgallery.com