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COLUMN

## Sidetracked in Rockport by the art of woodworking

PHILIP ISAACSON / IN THE ARTS

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Courtesy of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship  
"Omega V" by Ray Jones is among the creations on display in "Boxes."

A funny thing happened on the way to review a show at CMCA. As I was going up Route 90 in Rockport, I noticed, as I had in the past, the sign for the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship. Some occult force, some favoring gale urged me to the center's sedate, serene gallery and to "Boxes and Their Makers," its current show.

I am grateful to that force, because "Boxes" is an exquisite event. Drawn broadly from America with substantial ambassadors from Europe and Asia, its 30 pieces exemplify a level of design and craftsmanship that moves woodworking into realms usually occupied by jewelry and sculpture.

Whether woodworking belongs in them is beyond the purview of this article and, I suppose, the metamorphoses were inevitable in any event. Labels in any of the arts are becoming arbitrary. If you will loosen up a bit on your functional expectations, this show will dazzle you. The grace, the ingenuity, the acceptable preciousness of its components are thrilling. I can believe that in objects derived from wood, they represent an aesthetic high. As to function, who cares.

### THE ARTISTS' PATH

I did arrive at CMCA (the Center for Maine Contemporary Art) for the purposes of seeing "Planes of Abstraction," and I report with pleasure that it is an expedition through linear extremes and intellectual provocation. Made up of work by consummate and often-written-about artists, it holds no surprises, but in succinct terms tells us where they are in their work these days.

I call your particular attention to the recent work of Jeff Kellar. Over the years his pieces have moved from overt architectural references to gaunt fields of pure abstraction and, now, back to architecture again. His "Wall Drawing #7" in resin, clay and pigment is memorable in this genre.

Its tonality – light olive green – coupled with a forum of proceeding, receding and overlapping rectilinear forms make overtures toward the representational. Those overtures are tantalizing and to me, irresistible. I find myself looking for the representational in any passionless planar work, and here Kellar almost offers it and then pulls it back. The resulting animation and the elegance of this piece make my fingers itch.

I note also his "Wall Drawing #4" for its admirable austerity and his two "Hallway" pieces. Like the small pieces that have preceded them over the years, they are little wonders.

It is also a pleasure to see recent paintings by Don Voisine. Linear with forceful geometric interludes – notches, small triangles – they provocatively balance animation and restraint. His "Wheel 200" best exemplifies this. Voisine's larger "Thru and Thru," in the application of fat passages of red, seems more consequential, and "Wheel 200" really spins.

"Savannah Moon," a pigment painting by Winston Roeth, exemplifies the wall text's notation that this artist, through the use of basic shapes, explores the emotive power of color. In it a nest of concentric circles ranging through purple, orange and green imprisoned on a black ground pulsate at different intervals. The variation in beat, achieved by color, gives the work its dynamic capacity.



Courtesy of the Center for Maine Contemporary Art  
"Untitled" by Winston Roeth, from "Planes of Abstraction" at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockport.



Courtesy of June Fitzpatrick Gallery  
"Taker," 2004, acrylic, by Charles DuBack, at the June Fitzpatrick Gallery at MECA in Portland.

Duane Paluska's recent sculpture in wood can be read without reference to furniture. This liberates his work from historiographic allusions and allows it to be considered solely for its authority as an achievement in abstract art. The transformation has contributed gravity and physicality to his new large pieces.

"Huron," a work in painted poplar, exemplifies this in its refined timberlike elements tuned with unexpected consideration to one another.

I've written of Scott Davis so often that there is little that I can add other than the objects in his paintings are on unexplained spatial missions. They are staid in themselves but forever unattached. He is by far the most enigmatic artist in this exhibition.

### TONIC FOR THE TIMES

I have also written about Charles DuBack from time to time. A frequent exhibitor in these precincts, he

nevertheless seems forever fresh. If I were asked to summarize his paintings, watercolors and collages, I would say something like the freshness comes from within. I realize that is non-descriptive, but that's the feeling I get when I see his work.

He has a meticulous sense of live placement; each mark, each unit in an appointed place. In variant after variant of a common theme, there is an absoluteness and rightness to each and none seem, to me at least, more endowed than any other. It's uncanny.

You can test this at "Charles DuBack, Early and Recent" at the June Fitzpatrick at MECA in works in oil, watercolor, charcoal and pastels and, to my great delight, collages made in 1959. The collages are prescient; they suit us, not as artifacts, but as works expository of contemporary attitudes. At a time when collagists were still looking to Kurt Schwitters and the like, DuBack seems to have looked at what was to come. I find these as much of a tonic as anything I see around us these days.

If you're looking for an uplift in these times, go to see this beautiful show.

### **TAPPING INTO VERTIGO**

I mention two shows at the Bates College Museum and write briefly about one, "Joel M. Babb: The Process Revealed." The other, "Barry Nemett: Drawings from Italy," I will leave to another day. I call your attention to both in the hope that thus joined they will draw you to the museum.

Babb is a widely admired draftsman and painter. He has been reviewed in this column over the years and his recent show at Vose Gallery in Boston coincides, in part, with the event at Bates. The latter, as the title implies, is both didactic and offered for its voluptuous pleasures.

It may seem a bit odd to describe a show whose central component is called "City Scapes" and is devoted largely to high plunges into the streets of Back Bay, Boston, as voluptuous, but I think it accurately describes the seductiveness of his work. Babb lures the viewer to just above the buildings on Berkeley Street and around the neighboring insurance company towers and encourages them to draw him in.

And draw they do. If you suffer from a fear of heights or get dizzy when you look at a tall building, you'll absolutely love this show; it will get your phobias screaming at one another.

Babb is a master of perspective, simple and complex, and uses that endowment to adjust the city to suit his intentions. His vanishing points may not be urban geography's vanishing points, but they give us a city that complies with the city we want it to be. In his hands, Back Bay is aesthetically perfect and duplicates what we are accustomed to think it to be.

The apparent precision of his work and the conclusions of his camera are not one and the same. His genius is in the differential. As an architectural fanatic, I am captivated by Babb's exquisite drawings of streets and his large paintings of the world bisected by the Charles River. Like any viewer I spent an inordinate amount of time positioning my eye to find familiar landmarks and then allowing Babb to confound me about streets I know well when I'm looking up. When he looks down, my streets are no longer there.

As the title "The Process Revealed" implies, this exhibition pairs detailed preparatory drawings with perspective calculations and finished paintings. It is fascinating, but invites a commitment of time. It's a good investment.

Nemett's "Drawings from Italy" is a wonderful and generous treatment of a land that I would describe in similar terms. It is scheduled to close on Dec. 18, but the run may be extended, I believe. I will try to write about it before it closes.

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