

NOT YOUR HIPSTER VINTAGE

“In Their Own Way: Vintage Watercolors by Rhode Island Artists (1890-1960)”

Bert Gallery

540 South Water Street
Providence, Rhode Island

Through March 19



Frank Mathewson (1861-1941), *Providence - From Fleur de Lys*, 1936, watercolor.



Florence Leif (1913-1968), *Dark Pines, Belgrade Lake*, watercolor.

IN 2010, BERT GALLERY CELEBRATES ITS 25TH ANNIVERSARY IN PROVIDENCE, MAKING IT ONE OF THE MOST TENACIOUS AND LONGSTANDING COMMERCIAL GALLERIES CURRENTLY OPERATING IN THE CITY. IN A TUMULTUOUS LOCAL ECONOMY, THIS IS NO SMALL FEAT.

Providence has a strong history of alternative art spaces of all stripes, but for private galleries, longevity is the exception, not the rule. Rhode Island's extended economic crisis has hit even the buzziest art establishments where it hurts. Recent closures of popular, albeit young galleries like 5 Traverse, YES Gallery and Stairwell Gallery have eviscerated the local roster.

In a steadfast departure from the offbeat mixed-media and industrial art trends championed in Providence art spaces, the Bert Gallery collection focuses instead on the cultural history of Providence and greater Rhode Island. Exhibits are pulled from their expansive inventory and estate holdings of paintings dating from the 19th century through the first half of the 20th century.

Opening up the year is a selection of watercolors with Rhode Island pedigrees: “In Their Own Way: Vintage Watercolors by Rhode Island Artists (1890 — 1960).”

Always ready to lay foundations for the future in art, even in previous centuries, Rhode Island artists were on the leading edge of the American watercolor movement. Long maligned as a utilitarian and decorative art, watercolor had finally gained traction in the United States by the late 19th century as critically acclaimed artists like Winslow Homer established the medium's popularity.

By 1896, artist Sydney Burleigh, proponent of the Arts & Crafts movement and designer of the iconic Fleur de Lys studio building on Thomas Street, had established the Providence Watercolor Club. The organization still operates today as the Rhode Island Watercolor Society at Slater Memorial Park in Pawtucket.

While the landscapes, seascapes and fussy European travel paintings on view in this exhibit don't exude the cutting-edge, or even a consistent quality, there are yet a few high points, such as Edgar Corbridge's precisely rendered “Little White



Sydney Burleigh (1853-1931), *By the Sea*, watercolor.

Building” and Florence Leif’s dramatic Maine waterscapes. The historical framework of the exhibition leads the viewer through three generations of Rhode Island’s leading watercolorists, allowing for a uniquely regional survey of the medium’s evolution and of the society that evolved around it.

“Providence from Fleur de Lys,” a lovely and rare streetscape painting by Frank Mathewson (fourth president of the Providence Watercolor Club), captures the view from the artist’s second story studio window in the iconic building, and the obscure color of the air during a snowy day in 1936. Threading the past through to the present, within this frame rests a keystone moment in an otherwise modest exhibition, and it’s moments like these that make it all worthwhile.

Bert Gallery’s longevity is due, in large part, to the dedication of Catherine Bert, who assumed sole proprietorship of the gallery in 1992 when it moved from its original location at the historic Biltmore Hotel to its current home at Corliss Landing.

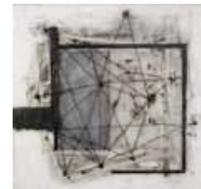
When asked what has changed about Providence’s art scene during the gallery’s history, Bert posed a bright side counterpoint to the sector’s gloomy climate: “I’ve noticed that there are actually more galleries in Providence now than when we first started out. Also, I’m seeing more cooperation in the community recently — between the galleries themselves and also from institutions like RISD and the Providence Art Club.”

Offering words of wisdom to younger galleries trying to make it through the financial crisis, Bert insists that the best way to cultivate a strong collector base is to represent artists who have a strong record of producing great work over time. She also prides herself on knowing the work she represents inside and out, and makes it a point to educate her audience through lectures, research papers and podcasts, which are available on the gallery’s website.

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**March 10 through
May 22, 2010**

Kate Levin and
Patricia Daughton,
Curators

Mayor Scott. W. Lang,
Honorary Curator

clockwise from top left:
Mark St. Pierre, David Loffler Smith,
Brooke Mullins Doherty, Evan La Porte

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