

State of the Art-Nancy Bauer-Salon TJ-Saturday July 30, 2016

The resurrection of our chapbooks

My daughter and I journeyed from Old Orchard Beach to Rockland to visit the new Center for Maine Contemporary Art (CMCA). The Center had been housed in Rockport, but at the end of its ropes financially it acquired dynamic leadership. Presto, it was resurrected, moved to Rockland, and was able to fund a handsome new building, opening June 26. The decision to move to Rockland was made, as I understand it, because the town itself has undergone a resurrection and now shelters a bursting arts community.

The three artists in the first exhibits are all “from away” but have summer homes in the state. The architect, Toshiko Mori, is also from away—a distinguished professor at Harvard University— but she too has a summer home in Maine.

The building itself is austere, constructed from floor to ceiling glass, steel, and corrugated aluminum siding with three exhibition spaces—one huge with 26 foot ceilings—plus a hallway that doubles as an exhibition space, an impressive lobby, rooms for education, and across a courtyard, offices of floor to ceiling windows. A sawtooth roofline of clerestory windows provides striking light. The walls are white of course, and the floors are of concrete. They had no wheel chair but offered a wheeled desk chair in which Grace jauntily pushed me.

The three inaugural exhibits were by Rollin Leonard (VERNAL POND), Alex Katz (SMALL PAINTINGS) and in the magnificent large space, Jonathan Borofsky (PARTICLE SOUL). As with viewing much contemporary art, we spent much time being perplexed, asking questions of each other, but also quite a lot of time being awe-struck.

I bought an “art autobiography” by Katz, *Invented Symbols*, one of the most mind-boggling books of art I’ve ever read. He proceeds decade by decade, describing what he was doing in his art, how he was experimenting. With great candour, he discusses his influences, including women’s fashion, advertising, jazz, poetry, theatre, photography as well as other painters. “I became involved with the idea of using the colors as weights. I was looking at Rothko and Franz Kline, the way Kline opens and closes edges, to give the blacks different densities and weights, so that they are no longer flat.” In the fifties, “I found Alberto Burri and Nicholas de Staël interesting. They both had paintings with thick slabs of matter. The forms were rectilinear and a little like Hans Hofmann’s, but more concrete.” I wish I had read the book before seeing his show because I might have understood it better. The small paintings didn’t seem good enough to come from an artist with such a notable reputation, but after I read the book, I understood in retrospect that these small oil paintings were preliminary experimenting for a larger work.

The impressive Borofsky exhibit is of huge sculptures—if you can call them that. One series (including one in the courtyard) is of stylized human figures made from different colours of plastic, joined and stacked 15 feet high, like the pyramids that cheerleaders make.

Private art galleries line Rockland's streets. The Center is within walking distance of the Farnsworth Museum and the new Wyeth Center. The plan is to turn the side street it is on into an arts way. We had planned to go to the Farnsworth and Wyeth, but the CMCA took up so much of our emotional energy that we decided to save them for another day. Grace's friend Mim Bird went with us. Discussing Andrew Wyeth she said she didn't much like his work. "A lurking bleak longing hovers just outside the paintings." I had to get out a pen to write that down.

We met with fearsome traffic. It took two hours to get to Rockland but three hours to get back to our cottage.

Frog Hollow Press in Victoria, British Columbia has just announced: "Coming soon--a revisioning of the New Brunswick Chapbook Series and who better to feature in volume one? Nancy Bauer, editor of the original 25-part series which ran from 1968 to 1981. Volume one: The Noise of the Weeping of the People - short story by Nancy Bauer."

Shane Neilson, aficionado of New Brunswick literature, suggested to me that he and Caryl Peters of Frog Hollow Press resurrect the New Brunswick Chapbooks. They would use the original cover design created by Bruno Bobak and Marjory Donaldson. We had published little-known writers who later became well-known. I can't take credit for the perspicacity with which the poets were chosen—I had much help in the selecting. We sold the books for 60 cents. Now one of them fetches \$180 and some of the rest over \$40—if you can find them. I have blithely given away any leftovers I had with not a thought for my old age. Neilson conceived the idea of starting off this revisioning with my unpublished story. I'm awfully pleased.