



Maine Farmland Trust's Season of Art

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Mj Viano Crowe, *Weight Of The World*, mixed media on board, 18 x 15x 5". All images courtesy Maine Farmland Trust.

By Olivia J. Kiers

New Englanders may refer to Maine as “Vacationland” every summer, but for resident farmers and locavore artists, summer in Maine is all about the garden. Due to the northern climate, harvest time in Maine is abbreviated, concentrated into a few short months before winter strikes once again. So, if nature—specifically, nature of the consumable, agrarian variety—is a Mainer’s muse, it stands to reason that such an artist’s work might register a *carpe diem* quality: exhibiting sensitivity to the precarious balance of climate, ecosystem, and humankind, while rejoicing in seasonal abundance. Such rejoicing beside thoughtfulness pervades *Conversations: Studio and Table* (through September 4) at Maine Farmland Trust’s Joseph A. Fiore Art Center.

Hidden in rural Jefferson on the mid-coast, the Joseph A. Fiore Art Center is the home of farming advocacy group Maine Farmland Trust’s summer artist residencies. Here, artists and writers retreat into nature to produce their work. The center’s windows are filled with green trees, dappled sunlight, and a wide field sloping into the distance towards Damariscotta Lake. Studio space fills a converted barn that stands near a vegetable garden the artists tend. The overall impression is one of quiet, time-honored focus on nature as inspiration and sustenance, but in fact the program is newly established and creating a local buzz. The summer of 2016 marked Joseph A. Fiore Art Center’s first foray into residencies, which were paired with a series of studio visits and dinner-table talks with high-profile artists who live or work in Maine. This summer, those artists were asked back to participate in an exhibition—the first ever at the center’s “Gallery at Rolling Acres.”



Jim Kinnealey, *Winter/Farm Pond*, oil on canvas, 12 x 16".

One work by each of the sixteen artists hangs in *Conversations: Studio and Table*. Curated by David Dewey (co-director of the center along with Anna Witholt Abaldo), *Conversations: Studio and Table* brims with the bright colors of summer, even in the winter pieces. Carol Rowan's *Artichokes* and Susan Stephenson's *Porch Pomodoro* bring a bold juiciness to the table—you can almost feel the artichokes' roughness in your hand, or bite into the tempting tomatoes. Jim Kinnealey's *Winter/Farm Pond* glistens with patches of thinly applied primaries: red, blue and yellow form rocks, icy water, and a broad swath of sunlit snow.



Kimberly Callas, *Honey-eyed*, 3D-printed mask: PLA filament, yellow and black iron oxide, acrylic and wax, 10 x 7 x 3.5"

As a whole the exhibition is preoccupied with the Maine's seasonal extremes of abundance or lack thereof, even in works that operate on a more internal plane. Part of Kimberly Callas' larger oeuvre of masks exploring the "ecological self," *Honey-eyed* is at once hermetic and complex. The mysterious honeycomb pattern invokes pollen-making bees, but the form seems chewed at the edges and empty. Are the bees and honey hidden deep inside for winter, or is this colony collapse disorder? There is no answer, only a blank stare. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Mj Viano Crowe's *Weight of the World* is a bright assemblage of found images. Here, the closed eyes of the central figure have the calming, strengthening quality of a nurturing goddess, and the butterflies surrounding her head in a cube are cause for wonder and hope.

Conversations: Studio and Table is an exhibition that crosses the line between straightforward and mysterious many times over without losing its central concern: the artists' relation to seasons. In that regard, the Joseph A. Fiore Art Center is the perfect venue. In between paintings, the gallery walls are punctuated with windows, juxtaposing the artists' vision with real Maine woods and countryside. It will be interesting to see how the space evolves as a gallery. Given Maine Farmland Trust's focused mission and the early success of the Joseph A. Fiore Art Center's artist residency programming, hopes are raised that *Conversations* offers just the first taste of many exhibitions to come.

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