



GAIL SPAIEN

Before the taking of a toast and tea

ESSAY BY MICHELLE GRABNER

MG



Puzzle Pieces and the Sea's Waves

MICHELLE GRABNER

Wing to wing and crest to crest, birds of every sort seize branches, air and ground in a small and enchanting oil on copper painting, *Allegory of the Air* (1608), by Flemish painter Jan Brueghel the Younger. This brilliantly rich landscape lives in a salon among major and minor Renaissance and Baroque paintings, some of which include works by Parmigiano, Bellini, Caravaggio, Dürer and Pieter Brueghel (Brueghel the Younger's grandfather), at the Doria Pamphilj Gallery in Rome. The landscape's organizational structure interlocks dramatic atmospheric energies with a stabilizing array of bird species that populate the foreground. The goddess muse of astronomy, Urania, and a few chunky cherubs command the space in between the earthbound aviary and the turbulent heavens.

Having spent a remarkable amount of time with this painting over the past summer, I was taken by how the pleasures of this allegorical jewel align with my elated engagements with Gail Spaien's recent paintings and their harmonious designs, window perspectives and luminous abutting patterns. Besides the inclusion of birds, there is little if any visual vocabulary that unites Spaien's paintings to

this Baroque treasure. Spaien's system of flat interlocking color blocks, crisscrossing lines, and patterned fields are exuberantly choreographed with gradient values and warm hues to build remarkable albeit profoundly accessible pictorial spaces. Spaien employs a method and style that has more in common with Proto-Renaissance painting or Henri Rousseau's self-taught style than the soft, gradual transitions of Baroque painting.



Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Allegory of the Air*, 1608

Style and technique aside, the splendid likenesses Spaien shares with *Allegory of the Air* appertain to an orderly world and an embrace of rootedness. The specificity of the birds that inhabit Brueghel the Younger's painting are so accurate and numerous that they would fill

much of a European birder's life list. A taxonomy this specific suggests that the artist was drawn as much to the beauty of the natural world as to the fantastical qualities of the allegorical; it is at this intersection where Spaien and the baroque painting unite, celebrating the aesthetic and intellectual conditions of observation and the beauty of interconnectedness.

Spaien's *Tea With Birds*, like *Allegory of the Air*, gathers together a range of bird species. They congregate in proximity to a bird feeder hanging in a lattice of bare branches. The sparrows and buntings taking up residence fill the frame of the sash windows, thereby creating an outdoor theater to the empty cottage sitting room where a wicker armchair with an upholstered footrest and a wooden caned high-back chair flank a table set with a coffee pot and two cups. The birds represent a vibrant sociability, enacting song, flight and feasting — an unpredictable spiritedness not familiar to the tidy and synchronized interior composed of carefully arranged patterns and early morning light. The space here, inside and protected from the natural elements of the outside world, is staged for resting bodies in observation and contemplation.

A different set of sash windows gives way to a night sky dotted with stars in *Pearl*. The seascape is depicted as a uniform accumulation of bright cerulean squares as faint Marsden-Hartley-like clouds streak the darkness. Framed within the celestial field is an ascension of song birds whose colored feathers are illuminated by the brass banker's lamp on the other side of the glass. Here, the wood-trimmed interior hosts an attentive blue-eyed dog, a vase of symmetrically arranged flowers and a throw pillow with a modern design. Spaien crafts an entire world within each interior, deliberately arranged with patterned objects and ornamented surfaces — and, she paints a world beyond the interior. It is this juxtaposition that underscores similarities, stitching together the bountiful in nature with domestic life. Spaien's paintings manifest gratefulness with a sentiment akin to Jan Brueghel the Younger's remarkably accurate depiction of the creatures of air.

Spaien's compositions are orderly, inviting worlds. They are peaceable kingdoms where beauty is compounded and the domestic is in accord with the natural world just beyond the panes of glass — although, as *Observed*

Landscape slyly and humorously demonstrates, while the window between a welcoming room where a jigsaw puzzle is under construction opens onto leaf-laden branches where birds roost in the landscape, the domesticated world is intentionally puzzled together while the natural world is a freer, organic space. The same subtle, gentle contrast between a carefully constructed interior that embraces the world outside is evident in *Spring*, where a teeming library opens up to a yellow veined sky with birds on the wing. The vertical stone fireplace in *Hearth* is frontal and commanding when compared to the nook compositions with open windows. Here the interior cottage environment gathers a variety of chairs and domestic textiles in anticipation of company and the caretakers are never pictured. The night landscape recedes, a backdrop behind the well-mannered flames that celebrate the rootedness of hearth and home.

It is rootedness, the foundations to place, to identity and to time, that Spaien seeks to convey in her observed and imaginary compositions. Every element in her paintings has a place, a locked and secure location that is in harmony with every other element. It is not just the

bird's relationship to the sky or a chair's relationship to its decorative cushions but the floorboards' kinship to the trees, the puzzle pieces' connection to the sea's waves, and a curtain's fellowship to wispy clouds. As literary critic Christy Wampole wrote, "in the Western imagination[...] transcendence is predicated on rootedness."¹ This is unambiguously evident in Spaien's flowing vernaculars but her imperturbable compositions are also tied to recognizable Eastern customs including Buddhist sand painting and the Japanese practice of bonsai. Like Brueghel the Younger's *Allegory of the Air*, with its disciplinary arrangement of realistically depicted fowl that endow the allegory with rootedness, Spaien's arrangements root our daily life with interlocking and strength-giving connectedness and interconnectedness.

MICHELLE GRABNER
September 2022

Crown Family Professor of Art
Chair of Painting and Drawing
The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

¹ Wampole, Christy. *Rootedness: The Ramifications of a Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

RED CHAIRS

2022

Acrylic on linen

55 x 60 inches



COTTAGE BONSAI 5

2019

Acrylic on linen

34 x 36 inches



FORSYTHIA

2022

Acrylic on linen

38 x 40 inches



OBSERVED LANDSCAPE

2022

Acrylic on linen

48 x 48 inches



SPRING

2022

Acrylic on linen

38 x 40 inches



TEA WITH BIRDS

2022

Acrylic on linen

55 x 60 inches



HEARTH

2022

Acrylic on linen

48 x 48 inches



PEARL

2022

Acrylic on linen

38 x 40 inches



Before the taking of a toast and tea

“And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.”

— T.S. ELIOT

from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1910–1911)

There are moments when I take notice of two kinds of time occurring simultaneously — a peripheral sense of anticipation for the next action to happen, alongside an overlay of timelessness existing only in split seconds. This recognition occurs randomly during a day; blankly staring out a window, watching birds fly from the feeder to trees going back and forth in the wind, floating in the ocean on a blue sky afternoon, eyes at the horizon line, not particularly in search of anything.

In T.S. Eliot’s poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Eliot visually conjures a scene where time is inescapable and limitless. His words mirror the intangibility of my awareness most specifically in line 34: “Before the taking of a toast and tea.” Throughout the entire stanza Prufrock emphasizes both to himself and the reader, the dissolution of the struggle at the intersection of time and timelessness. Defining transcendence.

The images in this series of paintings are observed and imagined places where one can be in relationship with others and the world and the self. My use of scale, proportion, pattern and subtly shifting color are visual elements that create a slight perceptual and physical dislocation, not unlike encountering a one hundred year old bonsai tree.

These paintings are places where many kinds of time overlap. Concrete and ephemeral. There but not there. Phenomenon and mirage.

— GAIL SPAIEN

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EDUCATION

San Francisco Art Institute, M.F.A.
University of Southern Maine, B.F.A.

ONE & TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2023 Upcoming: Taymour Grahne Gallery, London, England
Upcoming: studio e gallery, Seattle, WA
2022 *Before the taking of a toast and tea*, Nancy Margolis Gallery, online
2021 *Still Life with Water*, Nancy Margolis Gallery, online
2020 George Marshall Store Gallery, York, ME
2019 *Bonsai Cottage*, AD Gallery, University of North Carolina, Pembroke, NC
Renegade Mirage, Carol Calo Gallery, Stonehill College, Easton, MA
2017 *Serenade*, Ogunquit Museum of American Art, Ogunquit, ME
2016 *Still-Lifes and Botanicals*, Coastal Maine Botanical Garden, Boothbay, ME
2014 *Dozier Bell and Gail Spaien*, Aucocisco Galleries, Portland, ME
2013 *New Paintings*, Ellen Miller Gallery, Boston, MA
2012 *The World Over*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland, ME
2010 *Between: Gail Spaien and Ahmed Alsoudani*, Aucocisco Galleries, Portland, ME
In Winter, Garden, Archive Project 6, Miller Block, Boston, MA
2008 *Garden Archive*, Project 4, Museums of Old York, George Marshall Store Gallery, York, ME
Garden Archive, Project 5, William Scott Gallery, Provincetown, MA
2006 *New Work*, Miller Block Gallery, Boston, MA
2004 *Damon Lehrer and Gail Spaien*, William Scott Gallery, Boston, MA
2003 *Charm*, Museums of Old York, George Marshall Store, York, ME
2002 *Samplers and Mourning Paintings*, Aucocisco Galleries, Portland, ME
2001 *Domestic Time*, Vanier Gallery, Tucson, AZ
2000 *Counting*, Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME
Art Houston: Introductions, Jack Meier Gallery, Houston, TX
1998 *At the Edge of Wind*, Robert Clements Fine Arts, Portland, ME

1992 *New Work*, Gump's Gallery, SF, CA
1991 *Introductions '91*, Gump's Gallery, SF, CA
1989 *Visiting Artist Exhibition*, Center Gallery, University of Maine, Gorham, ME
1985 *Gail Spaien and Heather Wilcoxon*, Diego Rivera Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute, SF, CA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2022 *Activated Spaces*, Nancy Margolis Gallery pop-up show at Alice Gauvin Gallery, Portland, ME
Interior, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockland, ME
2021 *In Here*, studio e gallery, Seattle, WA
Mixing it Up, Maine Jewish Museum, Portland, ME
Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan School Artists, Maine Jewish Museum, Portland, ME
2020 *20*, Zero Station, Portland, ME
2019 *Flowering: Inside/Outside*, Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York, NY
Perfection, Able Baker Contemporary, Portland, ME
SPF 32, Ulmer Brewery, Brooklyn, NY
2017 *American Genre: Contemporary Painting*, Institute of Contemporary Art, ME
The 2016 Grant Recipients, Provincetown Art Assoc. and Museum, Provincetown, MA
Impact, Art Museum, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH
Take Flight, Museums of Old York, George Marshall Store Gallery, York, ME
2016 *Bounty*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland, ME
2015 *20 Year Anniversary Show*, Museums of Old York, George Marshall Store Gallery, York, ME
2014 *New Acquisitions*, University of New England, Portland, ME
2011 *Momentum*, Museum of Old York, George Marshall Store Gallery, York, ME
2010 *Collected Nature*, Miller Block, Boston, MA
2009 *Economies of Scale*, Miller Block, Boston, MA
Winter Salon, Denise Bibro Fine Art, New York, NY
2008 *Out There: Mediated Landscape*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland, ME
New Natural History, Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
2007 *Biennial*, Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
Nature/Nurture, Miller Block, Boston, MA

2006 *Peaceable Kingdom*, Museums of Old York, George Marshall Store Gallery, York, ME

2005 *Inside/Outside*, Miller Block Gallery, Boston, MA
Pretty Sweet: The Sentimental Image in Contemporary Art, DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA
Transcribing Time: Grace DeGennaro, Gail Spaien, Alice Spencer, Maine Center for Contemporary Art, Rockport, ME
Momentum: PCF Advancement Grant Finalists, George Marshall Store Gallery, York, ME
Gallery Artists, William Scott Gallery, Provincetown, MA

2002 *Elements Gallery*, Rockland, ME
York Public Library, York, ME

2001 *Domestic Culture*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland, ME
Elements Gallery, Rockland, ME
John Beuche Gallery, Northeast Harbor, ME
Abstraction:22 Visions, Maine Art Gallery, Wiscasset, ME

1999 *Accord III*, Museums of Old York, George Marshall Store Gallery York, ME

1998 *Biennial*, Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
O'Farrell Gallery, Brunswick, ME

1997 *Faculty Exhibition*, Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME
Picking up the Pieces, Museums of Old York, George Marshall Store Gallery, York, ME
3 Painters, 2 Sculptors, Between the Muse, Rockland, ME
Summer Salon, Robert Clements Gallery, Portland, ME

1996 *Skowhegan at 50: A Maine Legacy*, Baxter Gallery at Portland School of Art, Portland, ME
December International, June Fitzpatrick Gallery, Portland, ME
Miniatures, Between the Muse, Rockland, ME

1995 *Contemporary Collage*, Frick Gallery, Belfast, ME
Annual, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, ME

1994 *Visual Artists Showcase*, Boston Center for the Arts, Boston, MA

1993 *Solstice Tree Project*, Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
The Unique Print, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, ME

1992 *O'Farrell Gallery*, Brunswick, ME
Small Views, Large Spaces, Turtle Gallery, Deer Isle, ME
Claudia Chaplin Gallery, Stinson Beach, CA

1991 *Seascapes*, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, ME

1990 *Crocker-Kingsley Annual*, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA
Individual Artist Grant Finalist Exhibit, Marin Arts Council, Mill Valley, CA

1989 *Bay Arts 89*, San Mateo Arts Council, San Mateo, CA
Natsoulas Novelozo Gallery, Davis, CA

1988 *Exhibition 88*, Sun Gallery, Hayward, CA
Overview, Walter Athol McBean Gallery, SF, CA

1987 *Exchange*, San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, San Jose, CA
Masters 87: SF Art Institute Graduate Exhibition, Fort Mason, SF, CA

1986 *Marin Arts Council Invitational*
Woman Arts, Sausalito Bay Model, Sausalito, CA

1985 *Headlands Center for the Arts*, Group Exhibition, Sausalito, CA

RESIDENCIES, GRANTS, AWARDS

2021 *The Hopper Prize*, Finalist, hopperprize.org

2020 *Varda Artist Residency*, Residency Fellowship, Sausalito, CA

2016 *Lillian Orlowsky and William Freed Foundation*, Grant Award
Maine Arts Commission, Project Grant Award

2010 *New Hampshire Charitable Foundation*, Artist Advancement Grant
Maine Arts Commission, Visibility Grant Award

2006 *Maine Arts Commission*, GIG Grant Award

2004 *Maine Arts Commission*, GIG Grant Award

1996 *Djerassi Foundation Resident Artists Program*, Fellowship, Woodside, CA

1990 *Crocker Art Museum*, Merit Award, Sacramento, CA

1988 *Millay Colony for the Arts*, Fellowship, Austerlitz, NY

1986 *Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture*, Scholarship, SFAI

1985 *Headlands Center for the Arts*, Seminar-in-residence, Sausalito, CA

1978 *Whitelands College*, University of London, London, England

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- 2022 *Portland Press Herald*, "Painters go to different depths in Portland, Rockland shows," Jorge S. Arango, August 28
- 2021 *Crosscut*, "The Seattle Deconstructed Art Fair returns for a second year," Margo Vansynghel, August 2
Art New England, "Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan School Artists," Carl Little, May/June
Portland Press Herald, "Skowhegan School's Influence, Adventurousness on Display," Jorge S. Arango, May 23
Portland Phoenix, "Skowhegan School at the Maine Jewish Museum," Edgar Allen Beem, May 19
Maine Arts Journal: The UMVA Quarterly, "Gail Spaien: Anchoring and Suspension and Gravity and Light," Carl Little
Portland Press Herald, "Maine Jewish Museum reopens with exemplars of art and craft," Jorge S. Arango, February
- 2020 Hopper Prize: Interview <https://hopperprize.org/gail-spaien-interview/>
Radar Poetry, editions 26 +27, radarpoetry.com
- 2019 *Maine Arts Journal: The UMVA Quarterly*, "Maine in the Abstract," Edgar Allen Beem
Portland Press Herald, "Skillfully curated, Able Baker exhibition explores 'Perfection'," Dan Kany, February 18
- 2018 *American Genre: Contemporary Painting*, catalog for the exhibition, curated by Michelle Grabner, ICA, Portland, ME
Maine Arts Journal: The UMVA Quarterly, "The Wave of Creativity," Dietlind Vander Schaaf
- 2017 *MaineToday.com*, "With Two Weeks Until it Closes, American Genre Beckons Fans of Contemporary Painting,"
Bob Keyes, Aug 28
- 2016 *Portland Press Herald*, "At the Institute of Contemporary Art, and exploration of 'Bounty' in all its forms,"
Dan Kany, September 18
- 2015 *New American Painting*, Northeast issue 116, Juror, Michelle Grabner
- 2014 *Two Coats of Paint*, "Snap: A Visit to Maine College of Art," November
- 2013 *Boston Globe*, "Gail Spaien, New Paintings," Cate McQuaid, March 20
Boston Globe, "Critics Pick," March 13
- 2012 *Portland Phoenix*, "Serious Thoughts in a Frivolous Season," Nicholas Schroeder, November 7
- 2010 *Art New England*, "Gail Spaien and Ahmed Alsoudani at Aucocisco Galleries," Carl Little, November/December
Portsmouth Press Herald, "Artist Wins \$25,000 Grant to Build Studio," Jeanne Mccartin, October 2
Boston Globe, "Winter's Weight and What Lies Below," Cate McQuaid, February 17
- 2008 *Yankee Magazine.com/blogs*, "Out There," Edgar Allen Beam, November
Accent Magazine, "Modern Art Meets Natural History," Jamie Thompson, March/April
- 2005 *Art New England*, "Sentimental Journey: Time and Memory in Pink and Gray," Susan Boulanger, June/July

- 2004 *The Wire*, "Profile," Rebecca Cox, May
Art New England, "Maine Charm: Paintings by Gail Spaien," Mary Behrens, October-November
- 2003 *Portsmouth Herald*, "Profile: Charm, Waterworks," Jeanne McCartin, July 1
- 1999 *New American Painting*, Volume 20, February
- 1998 Channel 13 TV, "One of 5 featured artists," Portland Museum of Art Biennial Exhibition, WGME-TV video production

SELECTED PUBLIC & PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

- David H. Koch Memorial Sloane Kettering Cancer Center, NY
Fidelity Investments, MA
Portland Museum of Art, ME
University of Southern Maine, ME
University of New England, ME
Intuit Corporation, CA



