PHILIP FREY
In the Moment
AUGUST 20–SEPTEMBER 14, 2014
Essay by Daniel Kany

Spring for Two, 2014, oil on linen, 5 x 7 inches
Cover: Evening Drift, 2014, oil on linen, 30 x 40 inches

COURTHOUSE GALLERY
FINE ART
6 court street ellsworth, maine 04605  courthousegallery.com  207 667 6611
Evening Sparkle, 2014, oil on linen, 36 x 48 inches

Patchwork, 2014, oil on linen, 12 x 16 inches
Probably the most common understanding of “Maine painting” is the image of an artist alone on the coast set to the task of translating what he sees before him onto the canvas in front of him. Style is his shorthand—his tool as well as his personal signature. It’s a convenient narrative precisely because it ignores the ever-shifting tides of culture and history without which art is wont to find context or meaning.

For a painter who respects the audience, painting is a balancing act involving a series of issues including: complexity versus clarity, control versus looseness, detail versus economy, appeal versus accuracy, and history versus the here-and-now.

Philip Frey is a painter who respects our shared, long-standing culture of painting and the audience that energizes it. While he wants the audience of his paintings to have a “smart, interesting and enjoyable experience,” his art first must pass his personal standards. If he is to ever show it in public, the work has to have been inspired and he has to enjoy it. Frey doesn’t pander. And he is allergic to contrivance.

Frey’s goal is to make his paintings feel right, honest and authentic.

His brushwork is lively, rhythmic and easy to follow (one glance at the trees in *Evening Sparkle* and it’s clear Frey wants his brush to match nature’s most danceable rhythms). His
colors pop: for example, the yellow and orange punctuation on the right side of the otherwise blue-and-white world of *Left Hanging*. His forms and figures are impressively economical and yet readily legible: This is particularly notable in his figurative works like *One, Two, Three, Go!* featuring a group of youths on a pier who are uncannily well-rendered in their poses, gestures, weights, and actions despite being no more fussied over with the brush than any other elements in the painting.

Frey is willing to use high-contrast and deep volumes and then do the work of tying the image back to the surface (and therefore the composition) with his brushwork and the materiality of the paint. Frey handles this with particular interest in his shifting-time-of-day images such as *Swing Bridge Geometry* with its butter yellow light coming from the right.

And needless to say, Frey’s compositions concurrently address both the two-dimensional design of painting and the spatial reality of the natural world. Moreover, Frey clearly enjoys the back-and-forth between art and nature: Some of his strongest and smartest recent works feature a series of ice fishing shacks he associates with Mondrian’s iconic grids or Malevich’s Suprematist geometry.

As inevitable as Frey makes this look in his paintings, these goals are sophisticated achievements Frey could not have attained without significant experience, personal and spiritual self-examination, and historical awareness. Frey engages the shared cultural space of painting. His work is indulgent, but not self-indulgent: It’s a like a shared meal—delicious, sustaining, and social.

We hear about artists’ and athletes’ “getting in the zone.” And we all know the “groove” of music that can turn us from listeners into dancers. While he credits Mickey Hart
of the Grateful Dead for the idea, Frey (a musician who also seriously practices meditation) is the first painter I know to make the distinction between the personal “in the zone” experience and the broader sense of “groove”—a psychic space created by musicians during performance into which the audience can also enter.

While Frey is a single painter, the groove he’s talking about includes his colleagues and the historical figures who paved the way for American Modernism to create an authentic mode of recognizable Maine painting: From Cézanne, Van Gogh and the Impressionists to Winslow Homer, Fairfield Porter, Marsden Hartley and a host of others. And while he welcomes them all to the party—along with the rest of us—Frey is the host and it’s he who calls the tune.

In the end, the critical moment for Frey’s art lies with his execution, which he uses to mediate content and style. For Frey, painting is a performance—not in the sense of theatricality but of getting in the zone and finding a groove—a rich and robust path to that shared cultural space we know as painting.

Art historian and musician Daniel Kany is the award-winning art critic for the Maine Sunday Telegram and the Portland Press Herald. He is the author of numerous artist catalogs and books. He lives with his family in Cumberland, Maine.
Ruby Glow, 2014, oil on linen, 24 x 36 inches

Leggy
oil on linen
8 x 10 inches
2014

Winter Harbor Dusk
oil on linen
8 x 10 inches
2014
Lime Light
oil on linen
9 x 12 inches
2014

Misty Shack
oil on linen
11 x 14 inches
2014

Geometry, 2014, oil on linen, 11 x 14 inches
In the Moment, 2014, oil on linen, 30 x 40 inches

Kelsea, 2014, oil on linen, 24 x 24 inches
The Long View (sketch), 2014, oil on linen, 5 x 7 inches
Kelsea Sitting, 2014, oil on canvas, 6 x 6 inches
Liz Painting, 2014, oil on linen, 6 x 6 inches
Megan, 2014, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches
PHILIP FREY

PHOTO: BRIAN PRESS

PHILIP FREY

BORN 1967, Portland, Maine

S O L O  E X H I B I T I O N S

Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, Ellsworth, ME 2009, ’11, ’13, ’14
Gleason Fine Art, Boothbay Harbor, ME 2012
Thomas Moser, Freeport, ME 2008

S E L E C T E D  G R O U P  E X H I B I T I O N S

Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, Ellsworth, ME 2006–2014
Gleason Fine Art, Boothbay Harbor, ME 2010–2014
University of Maine, Lord Hall Gallery, Orono, ME 2010
Between the House Gallery, Rockland, ME 1997
Spring Street Gallery, Belfast, ME 1997
June Fitzpatrick Gallery, Portland, ME 1996
Frick Gallery, Belfast, ME 1994

S E L E C T E D  C O R P O R A T E  C O L L E C T I O N S

Acorn Capitol Management, PA
Company C, NH
Dick Wolf Films, Dick Wolf, CA

A W A R D S

First Place Prize, Castine Plein Air Festival 2014
Heliker-Lahotan Foundation Residency, Great Cranberry Island 2012
Good Idea Grant, Maine Arts Commission 2004

S E L E C T E D  B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Gettysburg Review, Fall 2012
Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, Catalog, “Fresh Ways.” Carl Little. 2011
Maine Home+Design, “One’s to Watch” 2009
Paintings of Maine: A New Collection. Carl Little/Arnold Skolnick. 2006
Down East Books 2006
The Art of Monhegan Island Carl Little/Arnold Skolnick. Down East Books. 2004

E D U C A T I O N

BFA (Painting) Cum Laude, Syracuse University, NY 1990
Colombia College of Art and Design, Columbus, OH 1986–1988

TARGET GALLERY, (solo), Alexandria, VA 2003
Between the House Gallery, Rockland, ME 1997
Spring Street Gallery, Belfast, ME 1997
June Fitzpatrick Gallery, Portland, ME 1996
Frick Gallery, Belfast, ME 1994

SELECTED CORPORATION COLLECTIONS

Acorn Capital Management, PA
Company C, NH
Dick Wolf Films, Dick Wolf, CA

AWARDS

First Place Prize, Castine Plein Air Festival 2014
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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gettysburg Review, Fall 2012
Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, Catalog, “Fresh Ways.” Carl Little. 2011
Maine Home+Design, “One’s to Watch” 2009
Down East Books 2006
The Art of Monhegan Island Carl Little/Arnold Skolnick. Down East Books. 2004

EDUCATION

BFA (Painting) Cum Laude, Syracuse University, NY 1990
Colombia College of Art and Design, Columbus, OH 1986–1988
Cadmium Cruiser, 2014, oil on linen, 6 x 8 inches