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That figures

Two painters explore isolation, sense of place in concurrent Newport Art Museum exhibitions.

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Jess Braley | Mercury

NEWPORT, R.I. - If two current painting exhibits at the Newport Art Museum are indicators, we're in for quite a year at the 100-year-old institution. Andrew Nixon's "I Am Here and You Are Not" and Ann Daum's "Now and Then" play off each other seamlessly in a painterly exercise in places and faces.



Everyman at the Quarterpole, oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches

Nixon's expansive show covers work from 1994 to 2011 and features 11 paintings in the hallway and another 35 in the main gallery. Subject matter splits between pure landscapes and figurative works with a few other treats mixed in along the way, including a series study of clouds. The title "I Am Here and You Are Not" refers to "the way in which we routinely exchange the ineffable experience of real places (the immediacy of earth, air and light) with their representation in pictures, maps and new media. Although place is obviously external, our sense of it is deep in the fabric of being, inseparable from imagination and memory," according to Nixon.

For me, the 11 hallway paintings set the stage for the show, building a feeling of solitude and meditation, isolation and organization. Maps, grid, aerial views and landscapes of both personal and historic significance line the walls making way for a room full of landscapes and figurative paintings, including "O, America," a great white whale cresting a wave, "Everyman at the Quarterpole," a jockey racing down the track on a nearly detail-less black racehorse, and the show's namesake.

Nixon in the show's statement is "interested in the way character and landscape interact, and in how this relationship shapes people and the places they inhabit. He is also investigating time and themes of orientation and dislocation." This shows most clearly in the show's namesake painted in 2007, "I Am Here and You Are Not," which depicts four people around a table, a tiny black dog, a giant map of the world and a hula-hoop. Their story is unknown but gives way in their clothing and actions. One erases the map as two others write on it. The fourth holds the hoop for the dog to jump through, but he holds it around the table, a blank book in hand. A toy top spins on the table.

"Now and Then" features 27 pieces, a mix of Daum's paintings and hand-pulled prints. Her work unlike Nixon's is of concrete places, people and things either here in her native state of Rhode Island or near her Maine summer home: a blueberry harvest, a girl hanging laundry on the line

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and an older man staring out the window pensively. While not the meditative studies of Nixon's landscapes and figures, the loneliness and isolation of Daum's subjects strike similar emotional chords. The most dynamic painting in Daum's show is the one that won "Best of Show" in the 2010 Newport Annual: "Portrait of a Migrant Blueberry Harvester." A man in a brilliant blue windbreaker stares back at the viewer his face completely in shadow, his identity obliterated as he confronts the viewer. Faceless identity is something the artist revisits in many pieces, including "Edna." Only a small solar print entitled "No Tomorrow (After Katrina)" shows a face looking directly at the viewer. The subject looks back in despair, alone and isolated by circumstance. In "From My Studio," Daum plays with the viewer, putting them in the claustrophobic isolation of a room looking out. A distant landscape blocked from your view by wires, poles, trees and buildings, the most obnoxious building of them all a candy pink box next door.

Nixon builds the same sort of tension and isolation in "The Lake." Is it the vulnerability of a swimsuit, black sheep status in the family, or something else that keeps the viewer from partaking in the fun and frolicking down by the water? A line of stern adults, from a bygone era, old enough to know better, block your way to the water. You're excluded and that's no mistake, they want it that way, with only one looking away, down at the swimmers.

Daum says her colors are inspired by the Impressionists' use of cadmium orange. Brilliant purple, blues, reds, yellows, peaches and pinks sing in her work and are exquisitely balanced by finely mixed neutrals. This can be seen most clearly in "Fishing in Roger Williams," in which a small red boat floats along in a sea of dark greens and browns, or in Daum's mastery of the pink-green complement in "Purple Bush, Blithewold." Daum's shadows aren't flat and lifeless, they're filled with color.

Nixon's colors, while only rarely brilliant, with dashes of reds, oranges, pinks and lavenders making appearances, is vibrantly deep, with layers of patina built up on most of the works. He plays with contrast fancifully as well, with it shining in works like "Oxbow," where the viewer peers out through the darkness onto a sunlit river bend, made up of beautiful greens, blues and grays. Perhaps the most interesting work in "Now and Then" is a small gray and red print tucked away in the far corner on the right as you walk in entitled "Beyond a Pale Horse." Much simpler than the other pieces, a tiny jockey of sorts sits upon a horse as it races along in space. Could it be the very same jockey who was visited by Nixon in "Everyman"? The crude figures scratched away from the print like a cave drawing, with just red and blackish silvery gray playing off each other. The nameless, faceless subject is perpetually alone, riding into the dark with the fiery-red burning at his white horse's heels.

Yes, these shows are bleak and desolate at times, but that doesn't make them any less brilliant. "Now and Then" and "I Am Here and You Are Not" are a great start to the new year at the Newport Art Museum.