

:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

Jay Stern: Awning

6/22/24 – 8/17/24

Grant Wahlquist Gallery is proud to announce Jay Stern's first solo exhibition in Maine, "Awning." The exhibition runs from June 22 – August 17, 2024. **Please join us for a reception with the artist Saturday, June 22nd, from 5 – 8 pm.**

Since his arrival in Maine in 2021 Jay Stern has rapidly become known for jewel-toned paintings of interior scenes and still lifes. Stern begins his paintings with a thin, loose ground over which increasingly active, quick brushstrokes proliferate, alternately calling attention to the underlying ground or tucking it away such that each work manifests its own construction in an almost archeological fashion. Stern's obsession with the mechanics of appearances, the imbrication of abstraction and representation, and painterly surfaces places his practice squarely within a Modernist project that has obvious forbears in the region, especially John Marin and Milton Avery. Yet as "Awning" makes clear, perhaps no artist has had as seismic an effect on Stern's work as Paul Cézanne, whose own investigation of the landscape was greatly influenced by his friendship with geologist Antoine-Fortuné Marion. As Cézanne wrote to painter Joachim Gasquet, "In order to paint a landscape well, I first need to discover its geological foundations."

Though "Awning" does contain interior scenes, here Stern presents, for the first time, predominantly images of the Maine landscape—his own acts of geological excavation. While perhaps no subject has been explored so exhaustively in Maine art, Stern's combination of a newcomer's eyes and an explicitly queer perspective enables a fresh contribution to this storied tradition. The exhibition's title clearly nodding to structures that cover liminal or exposed spaces such as windows and doorframes, these paintings evince psychic states that are themselves liminal and exist on the cusp of a wide variety of transitions. By tracking the landscape through New England's seasons and careful composition and framing, Stern summons our attention to complicated feelings about coverage and exposure, constraint and freedom, shelter and wilderness, chaos and control.

Taken as a whole, "Awning" reveals the analogical nature of Stern's artistic project. For example, the structures depicted in *Exposed Fall House* and *House on Mechanic St.* sit behind trees denuded of foliage and function as metaphors for (bodily) exposure, of intruding and perhaps also being observed. Taking this implicit sense of voyeurism further, *Hope Park* and *Birch Point Signs* both call attention to the often arbitrary ways in which land is broken into discrete or manageable units; through subtle invocation of the practice of cruising, they also seem to suggest the ways in which queer and other marginalized people have found ways to put the landscape to alternative use. Even in the interior scenes that remain—including the largest single painting in "Awning," *Forever Suspended in a Doorway (Self Portrait)*—the outdoors seems to emotionally predominate, to seep, intrude, or erupt into domestic space via moments of pictorial distortion.

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Each of the paintings in “Awning” depicts a moment of fracture, cleavage, or becoming. Sometimes this depiction is literal, as in *Early Summer*, with its evocation of a table where a loved one has perhaps just departed; sometimes it is formal, as in the bifurcated scheme of *Drift Inn Beach*; sometimes it is perceptual, in which the near abstraction of *White Pine Walk* nonetheless becomes legible as a landscape. Yet in all cases these paintings are quietly powerful expressions of the potency of nature and everyday experience, of how—seemingly out of nowhere—a walk through the woods can lead to a revelation. In short, each painting is a manifestation of surprise.

Jay Stern received a BFA in painting from the University of Cincinnati and an MFA in arts leadership from Seattle University. Stern’s work has been presented in exhibitions at: NOON Projects, Los Angeles (solo); Turley Gallery, Hudson, New York (two-person exhibition with Jean Blackburn); UTA Artist Space, Atlanta (forthcoming); the Portland Museum of Art, Maine (forthcoming); the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockland; the Caldbeck Gallery, Rockland; studio e Gallery, Seattle; and Koplín Del Rio, Seattle, amongst others. His work has been written about in numerous publications including *Art New England*, *Décor Maine*, the *Portland Press Herald*, and *The Stranger*. In 2024, Stern received an Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation grant and was an artist in residence at the James Castle House in Boise, Idaho. He lives and works in mid-coast Maine.

The gallery is located at 30 City Center, Portland, Maine. Gallery hours are Wednesday through Saturday, 11 am to 6 pm, and by appointment. For more information, visit <http://grantwahlquist.com>, call 207.245.5732, or email info@grantwahlquist.com.