

RACHAEL PALACIOS

Made in Connecticut

There is a silver lining to this pandemic that has hijacked most of 2020. While some may lament the reduced travel radius, staying closer to home has allowed for discovery, or rediscovery, of local treasures. One such pleasure is the exhibition *Made in Connecticut* at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. The show marks the 25th anniversary of the Connecticut Art Trail, initially conceived to feature the State's relationship with American Impressionism. Artists such as Childe Hassam and John Henry Twachtman chose Connecticut for its particular beauty, dynamic seasonal landscape, and extensive shoreline and waterways. What began in 1995 with 10 museums guiding art enthusiasts and connoisseurs through the American Impressionism story evolved into 22 participating museums and galleries expanding Connecticut's art-historical narrative. The State's proximity to New York has been a draw for not just the Impressionists, but for a host of other creative minds from different eras. It continues to provide inspiration and offer a respite from the city's hustle and bustle to this day.

What better way to celebrate the anniversary of the Connecticut Art Trail than to invite the 22 institutions to collaborate and loan works for *Made in Connecticut*, an exhibition featuring works and objects that were made in Connecticut, many by hands native to the State. The show is independently curated by one such artist, James Prosek, who is also a writer, naturalist, and currently the artist-in-residence at the Yale University Art Gallery. While there are

no blockbuster masterpieces on display per se, Prosek has thoughtfully culled works that act as snapshots of different points of Connecticut's creative output. Together they form a solid compendium and it is astonishing to identify how many renowned talents are in the same exhibition. Little jewels from Hudson River School painters, to the aforementioned Impressionist landscapes to WPA works are represented. The Surrealists get their mention, notably with Kay Sage, and there is a nod to the progressive doyenne Katherine Dreier by way of photography. The image by Leslie Bowman documents Dreier sitting with Marcel Duchamp in her living room at her Redding home, "The Haven." Dreier, Duchamp, and other luminaries created Société Anonyme, influencing the course of modern art history in Connecticut as well as the rest of the United States.

More contemporary to our times are works by celebrated artists Josef Albers, Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Bourgeois, Laurie Simmons, Sol LeWitt, the list goes on. Two colorful and expressive paintings by Mohegan/American artist Kristin Emilyta celebrating her native culture chronicle the Wigwam (Green Corn) Festival, serving as reminders of the State's heritage. Striking a somber and more currently relevant issue is Titus Kaphar's *Another Fight for Remembrance*, a large canvas created in 2015 in response to Michael Brown's



Left and Below: On view at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Hartford; Titus Kaphar's *Another Fight for Remembrance*, 2015 (left); *Fitch Phoenix*, 1966, and Mark Dion's *New England Cabinet of Marine Debris* (Lyme Art Colony), among other works (below). Courtesy of Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

shooting in Ferguson, MO. This powerful painting underscores the need to continue creating in order to keep the conversations going.

The exhibition expands beyond the fine arts. Utilitarian objects such as a wooden bowl with handles, 1740–60, attributed to Northeastern Woodlands Native peoples, pointedly greets the visitor upon entering. The forward-thinking "Blick" Portable Typewriter No. 7, from 1892, alongside the *Fitch Phoenix*, 1966, a unique prototype sports car worthy of James Bond, are among the show's several attestations to the State's innovative minds.

With its impressive holdings, The Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington is one of the major venues in the original Connecticut Impressionist Art Trail. However, it is chartered as a non-lending institution and Prosek has astutely worked around this sticky wicket by including an architectural wooden sculpture by Fritz Horstman. *The Volume of Light* represents the shafts of light that traverse the copious number of windows at the Hill-Stead, at precisely 9:30 a.m. during the summer solstice. The connection with light and the Impressionists, the depiction of the mansion designed by another Connecticut innovator, Theodate Pope, even if through negative space, gives the institution its prevalence in the chronology. Other works that stand out are Mark Dion's *New England Cabinet of Marine Debris* (Lyme Art Colony), filled with detritus from the Connecticut shoreline. Collected and arranged by category, the work is an environmental Cabinet of Curiosities, reminiscent of 19th century museums of natural history. Speaking of natural history, Prosek cheekily includes a *Semionotus* fossil from the Early Jurassic period, indicating that things were made in Connecticut way before any of us were here.



Rachael Palacios is the director at Heather Gaudio Fine Art in New Canaan, CT. She has a BA and MA in Art History and has been a freelance contributor to *Art New England*, *iW*, *Revolution*, and other publications.