

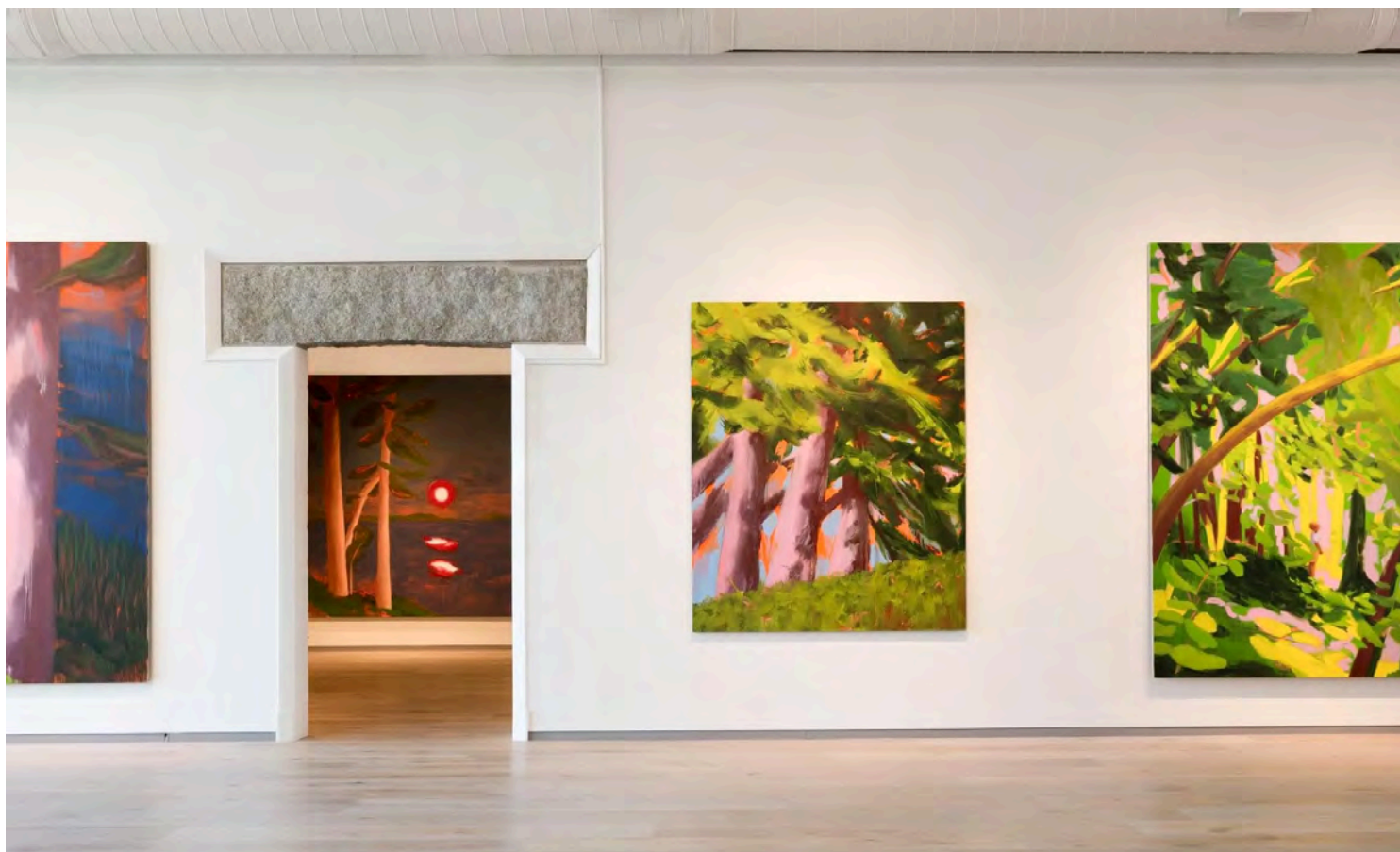
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Women on the Verge: Five Museums in Maine Showcase Nicole Wittenberg and Ann Craven

Exhibitions by the two mid-career artists embody a new spirit of collaboration among Maine art institutions. Together, their work tells a vivid story about differing approaches to capturing the passage of time.

Feature by [Jorge S. Arango](#)



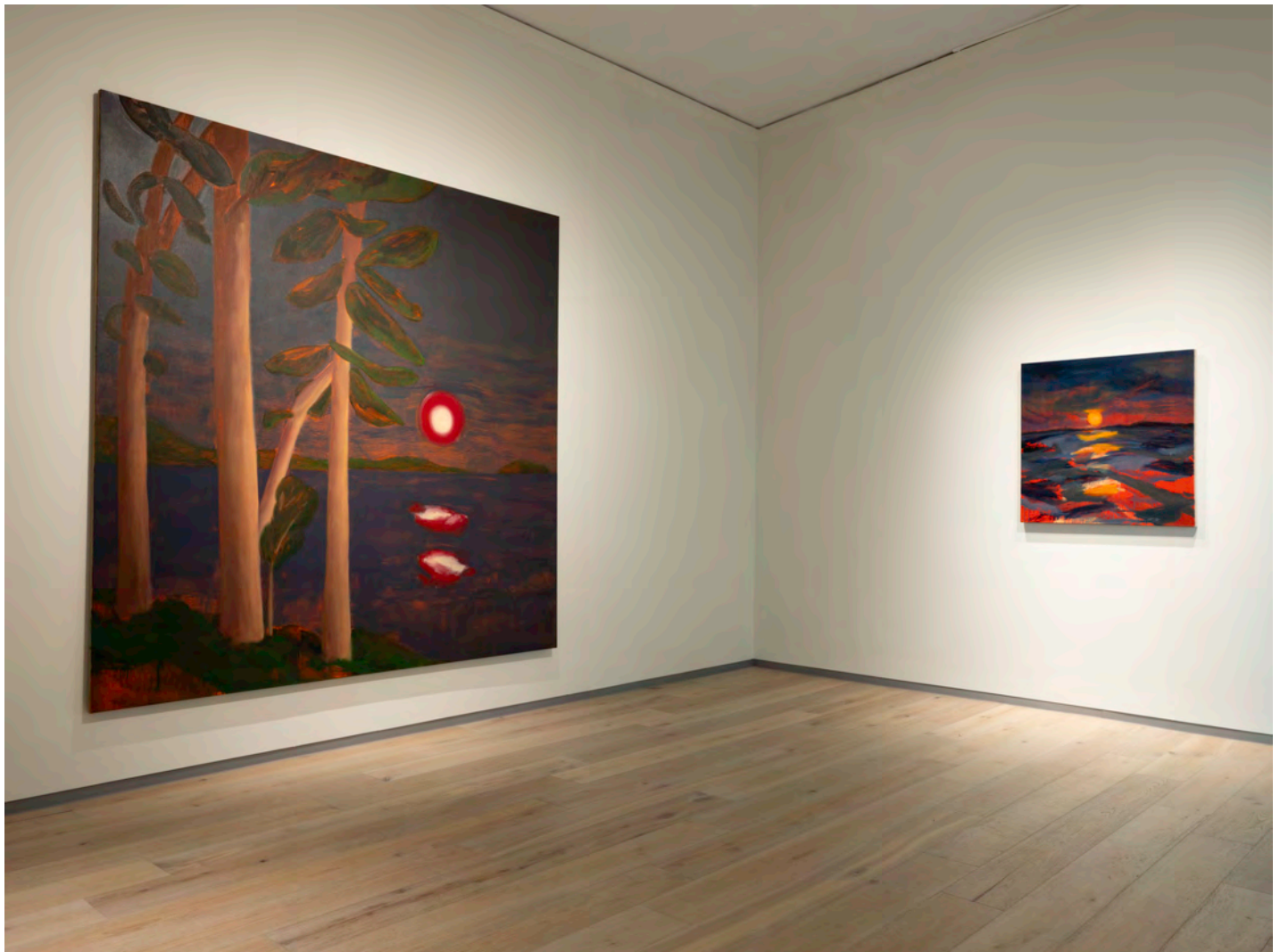
Installation view, Nicole Wittenberg, "A Sailboat in the Moonlight," Ogunquit Museum of American Art, 2025. Photo by Annabelle Collette. Courtesy of Ogunquit Museum of American Art.

Between the two, Nicole Wittenberg and Ann Craven have exhibitions at five prominent Maine museums this summer, exemplifying a new cross-institutional spirit of collaboration that began in 2023 with three shows devoted to the nonagenarian painter Alison Hildreth. Wittenberg is the subject of a partnership between the Ogunquit Museum of American Art (OMAA) and the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (CMCA) in Rockland. (There's a third Wittenberg exhibition at La Fondation Le Corbusier's Maison La Roche in Paris.) Craven—who is well known for opening the doors of her renovated Thomaston church space to her New York gallery, Karma, for summer exhibitions—has work on display at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, and a four-painting “pop-up” at the Portland Museum of Art.

Both women, who divide their time between New York and Maine, have toiled for years to forge their distinctive styles. Both paint landscapes and moonscapes. And both deploy vivid color palettes with emotive gestural vibrancy. The congruities, however, end there. Wittenberg and Craven have distinctly different temperaments and points of view, and they synthesize very

—suggests a new, sly bait-and-switch (initially seductive then subversive) that deepens the complexity of her work. Craven has been practicing her brand of repetition for years. But seeing her work in such breadth more effectively conveys her process as a kind of spiritual mantra that intones profound meaning from the cycles of life and the universe.

Wittenberg shot out of the gate years ago with erotic black-and-white paintings snatched from pornographic films that featured explicit depictions of erections and acts of fellatio. Though the works at the Ogunquit and CMCA are not explicit, she clearly approached them with the same flagrant audacity.



(left) Nicole Wittenberg, *Glen Cove 3*, 2022. (right) Nicole Wittenberg, *Broken Moon Study*, 2023. Both oil on canvas. Installation view, Nicole Wittenberg, "A Sailboat in the Moonlight," Ogunquit Museum of American Art, 2025. Photo by Annabelle Collette. Courtesy of Ogunquit Museum of American Art.

OMAA presents pastels, large-scale landscapes, and nocturnes, while the CMCA offers enormous new canvases of flowers specifically scaled to its cavernous main gallery. OMAA's works respond to the architecture and view, and the way that view transitions from Perkins Cove to coastal

large-scale paintings that currently hang in the central gallery.

The transition from quickly rendered pastel to painted canvas presented Wittenberg with an intriguing challenge. The white surface she usually started with “didn’t live up to the high chroma of the pastels,” she recalled during a visit to her summer studio in Camden.

To achieve the fever-pitch intensity she sought, Wittenberg began priming canvases with saturated colors—neon oranges and hot pinks—creating a blazing luminosity that irradiates canvases from behind and throws foreground trees into shocking relief; or, in the case of the nocturnes in another room, impart a smoldering red heat to the moon and its reflection in water.

The CMCA flower works amplify these effects exponentially. The tallest canvas is eleven feet; the longest is thirteen. All of them are populated with large platter-size blossoms that feel lush and alluring, yet also formidable and almost dangerously looming. They are cinematic in every way—certainly in scale and drama, but also in the sense that her sweeping, brushy strokes intimate restless movement. This is in keeping with Wittenberg’s passion for film, but also Baroque art, which was cemented at a residency in Venice during which she painted just a stone’s throw from the Chiesa della Madonna dell’Orto, the parish and resting place of Tintoretto, which houses dynamic biblical works by this master.



Nicole Wittenberg, *Climbing Roses*, 2024. Oil on canvas.



Nicole Wittenberg, *August Evening 3*, 2024. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

“Great paintings are in motion,” Wittenberg told me. “They’re not static.” But the kinetic energy of these canvases, and OMAA’s, additionally encompasses ideas from Abstract Expressionism, particularly “action painting,” a term coined in 1952 by critic Harold Rosenberg to describe works

how the works were developing, but the expansive gesture of the broom strokes also telegraphs the physicality of Wittenberg's own body stretching, thrusting, arching. She also employs drips, which she controls by moving the canvases to the floor when they threaten to run beyond the desired effect.

The CMCA paintings also thrum with political subtext. She began creating these during the run-up to the last presidential election, a time, she says, “when the world felt like it was compressing around me in a really intense way.” We can intuit that atmosphere of claustrophobia in the shallow depth of her flower paintings. The hydrangeas and climbing roses themselves, adapted from pictures snapped along roadsides in Maine, erupt forth from these shallow backgrounds. “They’re aggressive,” she concedes. In this way, they are a kind of fuck-you against the compression, almost assaulting in their staggering scale, pulsating color, and belligerent—if also ravishing—advance.

Where Wittenberg is explosive and demanding, Craven is steady and meditative. Not surprising, perhaps, from a woman whose college thesis was on Agnes Martin, an artist whose recurring lines and grids Craven likens to prayers or chants.



(far right) Ann Craven, *Moon (Quiet, Eternally August)*, 2023, 2023. Oil on linen. Installation view, "Ann Craven: Painted Time," Farnsworth Art Museum, 2025. Photo by David J. Clough. Courtesy of Farnsworth Art Museum.

"I've been painting from life since I was six years old," she said during a conversation at Bowdoin. "But I was more interested in something conceptual, and the moon was the impetus." She began painting this lunar body sequentially, setting up three to five canvases at a time *en plein air* on the rooftop of her New York studio and at her home on the St. George River in Cushing, Maine.

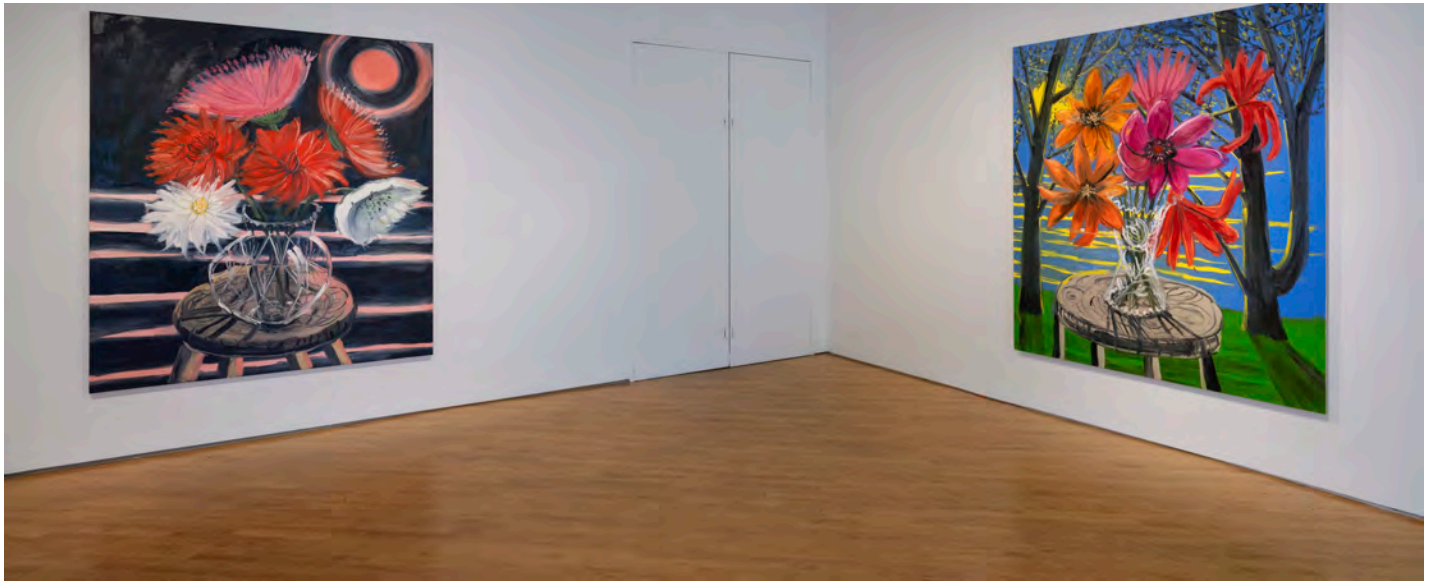
Her first show of moons ("101 Moons" at Lauren Wittels Gallery, New York) appeared in 1995. Thirty years on, moons comprise the entirety of the Bowdoin exhibition—a rotating affair iterated in three installations that will be organized by three different curators over the next two-and-a-half months. This first installment, on view through June 30, emphasizes Craven's conceptual framework by replicating shelves in her studio where she keeps boxes containing every 14-by-14-inch moon painting she did each month from 2020 through 2024. Initial curator Anne Collins Goodyear also hung the paintings to mimic the rising and setting of the moon.



(left) Ann Craven, *Tree (Purple Beech, Spring Night Sky, Again, Again)*, 2024, 2024. Oil on linen. (right) *Tree (Purple Beech, Spring Night Sky Again)*, 2024, 2024. Oil on canvas. Installation view, "Ann Craven: Painted Time," Farnsworth Art Museum, 2025. Photo by David J. Clough. Courtesy of Farnsworth Art Museum.

The multi-venue show was the brainchild of Jaime DeSimone, chief curator of the Farnsworth Art Museum, which presents Craven's work in four sections, each pertaining to one of the artist's recurrent themes: moons, trees, flowers, and birds. There is personal significance to each motif. The moon paintings are metaphorical symbols of the cyclical nature of everything—seasons, growth and decay, birth and death, menstruation, planetary orbits. In the trees section, the moon shines through several variations of a purple beech in Cushing, which she described to me as an "innocent bystander of hundreds of years." She continued, "It records place, like a GPS, of where I am. The tree doesn't move, but everything around it does. It helps tell the story of the movement of time."

Craven's process elucidates many things. It is chiefly, of course, about time and memory. "The brushstrokes can actually describe time," she believes. "And by painting three [moons] simultaneously, it allows me to also record the moon's rising and what that felt like." In this way, Craven's work prompts comparisons to that of On Kawara, or even further back, to Monet's recurring haystacks and cathedral facades, and forward to Dieter Roth's explorations of time and repetition through works of rotting foodstuffs.



(left) Ann Craven, *Dahlia's (For the Pink Moon)*, 2023. (right) Ann Craven, *Dahlia's (For the Yellow Moon)*, 2024–2025. Both oil on linen, 84 x 72 inches. Installation view, “Ann Craven: Painted Time,” Farnsworth Art Museum, 2025. Photo by David J. Clough. Courtesy of Farnsworth Art Museum.

But there is something detached about these precedents, the artists engaging sequentiality more in the interest of science (or in Kawara’s work, a kind of cold, affectless recording method). Craven’s use of this device, however, is redolent with emotion, at times evoking personal melancholy—especially the flower paintings, which all incorporate her grandmother’s crystal vase—and an intimate sense of memory. Her heart feels close enough to touch in these works.

This can sometimes come perilously close to sentimentality—particularly in bird paintings inspired by an ornithology book owned by her grandmother that she discovered after the matriarch’s death. And I’m not entirely enamored of the flower paintings, in which the moonscapes in the background feature palettes that can clash with the florals in the foreground, thus setting up a relationship in which these two elements compete for attention. They work better when, as one painting of asters at the Portland Museum of Art illustrates, the colors of background and foreground are more harmonious.

The moons and trees, however, invite us into a contemplative state that is profoundly silent and pregnant with the felt sense of time. Seeing several moon paintings lined up next to each other also creates a rhythmic cadence that feels almost hypnotic and prayerful, leaving the viewer to exit in a state of peaceful suspension of time.

Wittenberg Exhibitions

“A Sailboat in the Moonlight” is on view through July 20 at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art, 543 Shore Road, Ogunquit, ME.

Craven Exhibitions

“Painted Time: Moons (Laboratory)” is on view through August 17 at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 245 Main Street, Brunswick, ME.

“Spotlight: Ann Craven” is on view through September 14 at the Portland Museum of Art, 7 Congress Square, Portland, ME.

“Ann Craven: Painted Time (2020–2024)” is on view through January 4, 2026, at the Farnsworth Art Museum, 16 Museum Street, Rockland, ME.



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