

BROOKLYN RAIL

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ARTSEEN | JUNE 2025

Nicole Wittenberg

By Chris Crosman



Nicole Wittenberg, *Daisy Chain*, 2024. Pastel on paper, 15 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches. Courtesy Ogunquit Museum of American Art.

Nicole Wittenberg, with summer exhibitions in Maine and Paris, is having a long, and for admirers of pure painterly hedonism, a moment of what curator Suzette McAvoy rightly describes as unabashed beauty. The exhibition, *Nicole Wittenberg: Cheek to Cheek*, curated by McAvoy, is at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (May 24–September 14, 2025) with concurrent summer shows of landscapes at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art, titled *A Sailboat in the Moonlight* (April 18–July 20, 2025), and pastels and studies in *Ain't Misbehavin'* at Maison La Roche in Paris (June 13–July 19, 2025).

Flower paintings in Maine, even a few edging toward the erotic, are by no means new. I recall a wondrous group of sixties Maine landscapes by Grace Hartigan from a summer at Clark's Cove, then and now, a popular getaway and honeymoon destination. While Hartigan's early sixties painting marked a shift away from her own pioneering (and little recognized) achievements as a key figure in Abstract Expressionism, Hartigan's "Clark's Cove" paintings can be seen as celebrating newfound love and marriage to her fourth and last husband. Among several paintings from that summer, blue Maine lupines rise in pulsing, priapic splendor.

Cheek to Cheek
Center for Maine
Contemporary
Art
May 24–
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2025
Rockland, ME

A Sailboat in the
Moonlight
Ogunquit
Museum of
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April 18–July 20,
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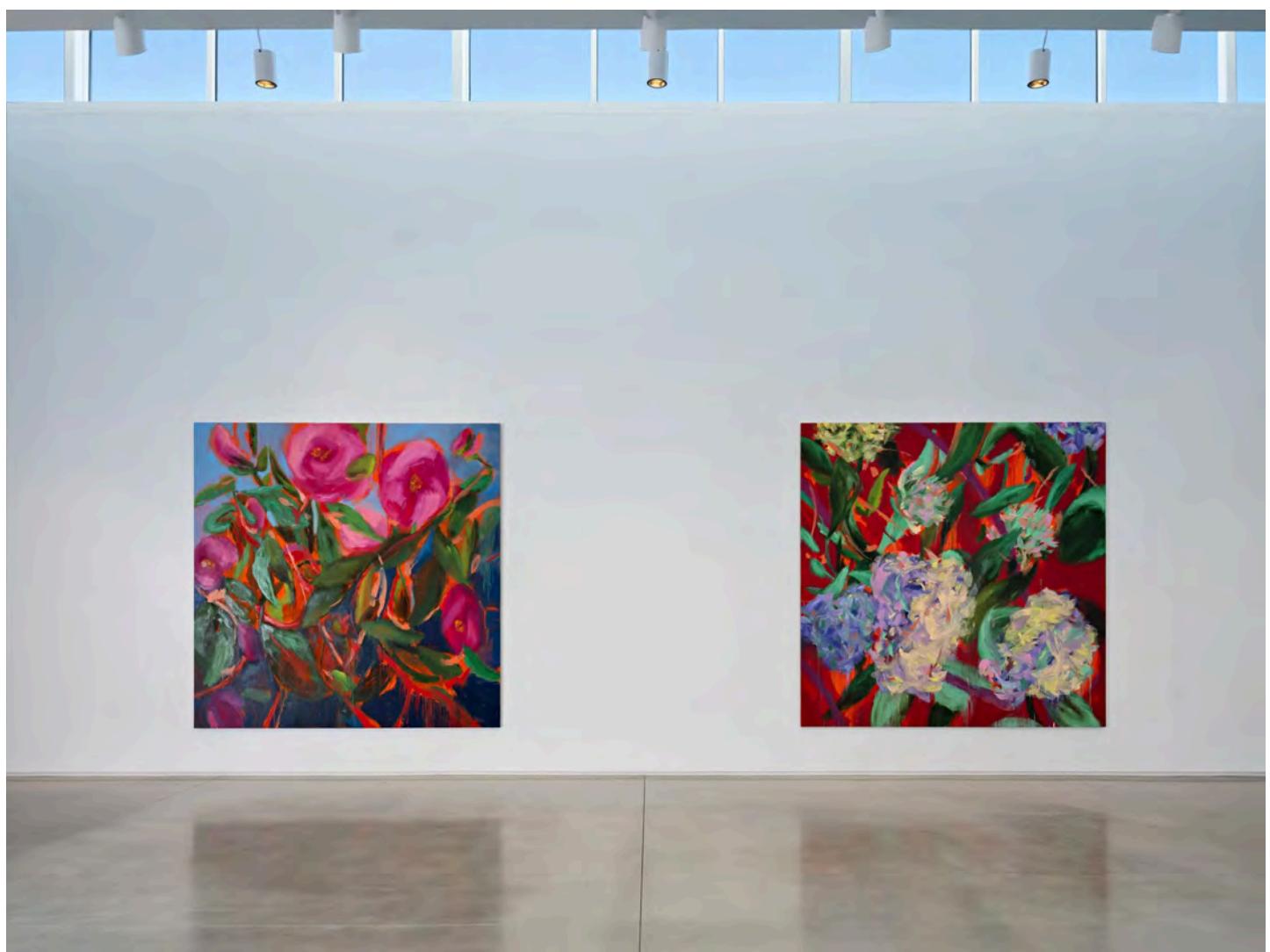


Nicole Wittenberg, *Riotous Gardens*, 2024. Pastel on paper, 11 ½ × 15 ½ inches. Courtesy Ogunquit Museum of American Art.

Like Hartigan's lupines, many of Wittenberg's most recent large paintings are of Maine wildflowers, hardy perennials stubbornly regenerating year after year, surviving harsh, long winters on rocky soil and framing hidden coves among the "pointy trees," as her fellow painter and friend, Ann Craven, describes them. They are nature's floral 'foundlings,' in all their bright, gritty majesty and sudden presence. Wittenberg's paintings literally drip with color, at once trumpeting and tender. Sensual, organic fecundity and un-still nature are leitmotifs running through Wittenberg's entire oeuvre.

Different series variously reference aspects of an irresistible, seductive nature. Relatively matte, dry surfaces open to fluid, fluttery wash-like passages. Vertical drips articulate high-keyed spring-green leaves and stems. Flowers

emerge confidently in full bloom with vibrant, saturated bright-orange edging and underpainting. It is telling that her recent large paintings are based on smaller *plein air* studies and sketches made outdoors—a longstanding and continuing tradition by artists from Marsden Hartley to Andrew Wyeth, Hartigan, Alex Katz, Neil Welliver, and Lois Dodd, among so many others. Wittenberg's ability to translate her small studies into monumental paintings while retaining a sense of spontaneity and intimacy, however, belongs to a touch that is uniquely hers. The largest canvases invite the eye to wander among the stems crossing over and under each other, complex compositions spreading over wall-size expanses even as the eye wants to linger on a discrete leaf or petal, each rendered with painterly precision and self-reference.



Installation view, Nicole Wittenberg: *Cheek to Cheek* at Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockland, 2025. Courtesy the Center for Maine Contemporary Art. Photo: Dave Clough Photography.

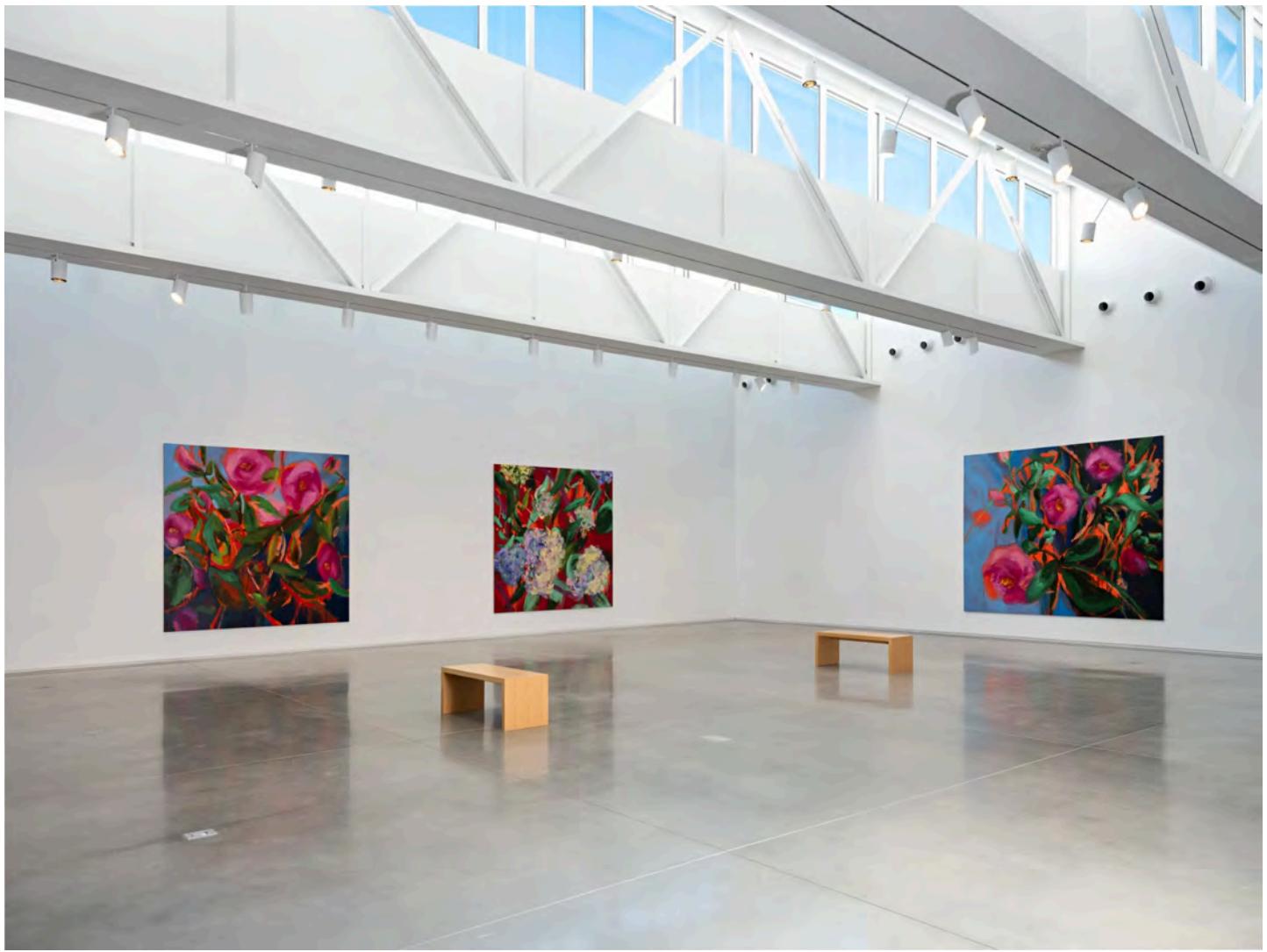
In a world of constant crises and dispiriting disruption, people need art for relief from every day, dispiriting realities. Truly, Wittenberg's paintings of Maine wildflowers in *Cheek to Cheek* may be seen innocently and joyously singing, "I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak," from Irving Berlin's musical *Top Hat* (1935). But the artist may also be gently reminding us that the film opened to immense popular acclaim in 1935—in the very teeth of the Great Depression, a time of world-wide cultural and political uncertainty including the rise of fascism. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers's perfect pirouettes out into a world of lavish fantasy and momentary escape, then; the exuberant, unapologetic beauty of Maine wildflowers distracting, if only briefly in our hopefully fleeting now.

Wittenberg sees her recent paintings as a "group of interlocking forms that overlay to create a massing of stems, flowers, and leaves—in that way, these are Baroque images." Her work is baroque with material sensuality and sensory excess as might be seen in Italian baroque churches. Moreover, the wildflower paintings are composed of overlapping, irregular forms in shallow indeterminate space while simultaneously pushing out against the framing edges. Forms coalesce and compress releasing energy throughout the stretched canvas. Movement is decentralized, asymmetric. These are dramatic paintings in which artifice prevails, commands attention—these are *not* flowers; they are adamantly, emphatically, *paintings* of flowers.

Wittenberg lifts the commonplace wildflower though scale and surface incident with a flashing, darting surface energy. Invoking the Baroque's thrusting dynamism where earth-bound sensuality collides with the metaphysical, Wittenberg's paintings are all the more miraculous for their origins in the prosaic—wildflowers. There is something of Bernini's heavenly lit Baroque sculpture and arcing rhythms along with Caravaggio's lowly peasant and prostitute saints in Wittenberg's goldenrods and Queen Anne's lace. Degas's late ballet dancers slip into this viewer's thoughts, as well.



Nicole Wittenberg, *August Evening 2, 2024*. Pastel on paper, 15 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches. Courtesy Ogunquit Museum of American Art.



Installation view, Nicole Wittenberg: *Cheek to Cheek* at Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockland, 2025. Courtesy the Center for Maine Contemporary Art. Photo: Dave Clough Photography.

Electric orange underpainting, breaking through like the backing chorus or base-line for an outdoor rock concert, shocks these paintings into action. Streaking, yet controlled drips of high-keyed chartreuse (Paris green) breathe as new-born shoots and stems. Bright, sun-dappled blooms arise in close, jostling clumps. The compressed, swaying flowers open and are seen against ever-deepening cobalt skies or azure depths.

Depth and illusion are simultaneously cancelled and carried by writhing form and twisting movement. Wittenberg's loose handling, at once gently caressing and brashly skittering, charges these complexly layered and textured surfaces with a sense of life forming and transforming itself even as we look. These are restless paintings. Giant, floating flowers and leaning stems looming over the viewer are hardly defenseless. And there exists a sense that Wittenberg's

wildflowers are indeed nature's returning "witnesses to a world that will continue without us" to borrow John Yau's poetic description of another artist whose work rages from within, too.

Up close, these large, color-shot, ricocheting paintings envelop, even stun the eye into viewing Maine's sudden summers from the perspective of butterflies and bees or Gatsby's "moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars." We encounter forms towering over us, stretching their lengthening stems and leaves into abstract, erupting blooms. They ask us to dance—close, intimate, alive. Cheek to cheek.

Chris Crosman primarily writes about living Maine artists for his local Maine newspapers. He is the former founding chief curator at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas and former director of the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine for seventeen years.

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