

Curators Apr 21 • Written By Michael Rose

Modern in Maine: A Conversation with Curator Devon Zimmerman



A painting by Nicole Wittenberg on view at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art in Ogunquit, Maine. Photo courtesy of Kristen Levesque.

The Ogunquit Museum of American Art (OMAA), is located on the picturesque Maine coast, about an hour and a half north of Boston. Founded in 1953, it has for decades been a place to see and celebrate art from the region and beyond. For Devon Zimmerman, the museum's

Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, the artistic legacy of Ogunquit and its museum are a jumping off point for exciting contemporary initiatives that look to engage new audiences. Through July 20, OMAA is hosting [*A Sailboat in the Moonlight*](#), the first solo museum show for contemporary painter Nicole Wittenberg. Exhibitions like this, and Zimmerman's enthusiasm for them, herald an exciting phase in OMAA's history.

Zimmerman has a rich background that brings value to OMAA. Describing his perspective as a curator, he says, "I came to the Ogunquit Museum of American Art from the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art before that. My scholarly background is in 20th-century modernism and its transatlantic movement between Europe and North and South America. Extending from this, I view the arts as inherently—and historically—intertwined and animated by global networks of people and ideas."

For Zimmerman, balancing the regional siting of his institution with its national aspirations is important. He explains, "I try to think about this as I build out exhibition programming at the museum. We are a regional museum with deep ties to the turn-of-the-century art schools that elevated Ogunquit as an important hub for modernism in the United States. But we are also an institution that has taken on a national reach by its very nature of being a museum of 'American' art. So, whether planning historical exhibitions on 20th-century modernism or contemporary artists, I gravitate to stories that place regional themes within national frameworks and, conversely, localizing national conversations within issues facing the area."

Zimmerman also sees his work as part of an historical tradition in which emerging talents are cultivated by travel to the Maine coast. He says, "Ogunquit's history as a gravitational center for artists, particularly young artists, to travel, study, and respond to the unique environment of Southern Maine continues to drive our mission today. It is in that spirit that we try to amplify and elevate emerging artists from across the country, and bring their work to the state to stimulate new conversations within the region."

[Nicole Wittenberg](#), whose show opened on April 18, is a New York painter of lush and expressive pastels and oils that reflect the natural world in potent color. Exhibited internationally, her work can be found in institutional collections including those of the Guggenheim, the High Museum of Art, the MFA Boston, and others.



Nicole Wittenberg, Midsummer Morning 2, pastel on paper, 2023. Image courtesy of OMAA.

Queried on what excites him most about Wittenberg's exhibition at OMAA, Zimmerman is enthusiastic, answering, "Where to begin! First and foremost, Nicole is an incredible painter whose work is profoundly informed by the history of painting. She has both admiration for and finds insight in a wide range of sources including Venetian colorists to the murals of Francisco Goya, as well as modernists from Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch, and Marsden Hartley, to name but a few. The exhibition offers visitors the opportunity to trace Nicole's affectual and iterative approach to image making, beginning with a small survey of her studies in pastel which she does *en plein air*, and specifically for this exhibition in Maine. These studies are then translated and scaled into increasingly large oil paintings. It is a marvelous thing to see how Nicole uses almost neon-colored grounds and different tools—including brooms—to retain and reimagine the initial impressions of her *en plein air* pastels into almost mural-size compositions."

Zimmerman goes on, "Additionally, OMAA offers an incredibly unique opportunity to place Nicole's large-scale paintings of Maine in dialogue with the landscape itself—the museum sits on three acres of land overlooking the coastline all of which is visible from a central panoramic

glass wall. It is quite moving to see the correlations and dialogues emerge between Nicole's work and the natural environment visible from the galleries."

OMAA's Wittenberg show is being presented in tandem with two other features on the artist. The first, *Cheek to Cheek* at the [Center for Maine Contemporary Art](#) in Rockland, opens on May 24 and the second, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, begins at Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris on June 12.



Nicole Wittenberg, Glen Cove 3, oil on canvas, 2022. Image courtesy of OMAA.

Asked about the dimension these other venues add to Wittenberg's show at OMAA, Zimmerman answers, "The two Maine shows emerged from a desire to collaborate cross-institutionally within the state, while also affording the opportunity to highlight two intertwined yet distinct bodies of Nicole's work. The OMAA show, as I alluded, surveys Nicole's work in pastel, while presenting a selection of larger paintings of the woods and waters of Maine, as well as a group of nocturnes.

The CMCA exhibition is going to comprise some of the largest paintings Nicole has made to date of highly gestural and rhythmic compositions based on flower studies. Both exhibitions together—alongside the Paris exhibition, which will show studies of many of the paintings in both exhibitions—will be a far-reaching exploration of Nicole's breadth as a painter."

Looking to the future, Zimmerman is excited about the museum's upcoming offerings. He says, "We are never stopping. We are set to start a new mural commission by Jordan Bennett, a multi-disciplinary artist who lives and works in Kjipuktuk (Halifax, NS), at the end of April. We then follow Nicole's exhibition with the first solo exhibition of work by Gisela McDaniel, whose approach to portraiture is beautiful, innovative, and transgressive. Lurking on the horizon are a number of larger-scale projects we have set for 2026 and the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence that will examine what it means to be an 'American' today."

With a curator of Zimmerman's caliber and the work of international artists like Wittenberg in hand, the Ogunquit Museum of American Art is on solid footing to continue to create compelling opportunities to experience art for Mainers and their neighbors throughout the region.

Devon Zimmerman is the Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art in Ogunquit, Maine. Zimmerman earned his BA at Boston College, his MA from NYU's Institute of Fine Arts, and his PhD from the University of Maryland. He joined OMAA in 2022 after previous postings at the Cooper Hewitt, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art. He has taught at Sotheby's Institute of Art and Marymount Manhattan College.

Nicole Wittenberg's solo exhibition A Sailboat in the Moonlight continues through July 20, 2025 at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art. The museum is open daily from 10am - 5pm and admission is \$15 for adults. For full details and to plan your visit, go to www.ogunquitmuseum.org.

To receive stories like this one in your inbox each Friday morning, [subscribe to the New England Art News Substack](#).



Devon Zimmerman is the Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art. Photo courtesy of OMAA.