

## A Painter's Theater of Destitution

The fifteen realist paintings in Linden Frederick: Night Stories take us on a tour of small-town Maine.



Carl Little October 28, 2017



Linden Frederick, "Ice" (2016), oil on linen, 36 x 36 inches (all images courtesy Forum Gallery and © Linden Frederick)

ROCKLAND, Maine — A dozen or so years ago, I gave a slide lecture and reading highlighting examples of ekphrastic poetry — poems about artworks — at the Belfast, Maine, Public Library. I started with W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," his famous riff on Breughel's "The Fall of Icarus," and went on to Randall Jarrell's "Knight, Death, and the Devil," W.D. Snodgrass's "Matisse: 'The Red Studio,'" Adrienne Rich's "Mourning Picture," and some of William Carpenter's poems inspired by Edward Hopper images.

The painter Linden Frederick, a longtime resident of Belfast, was in the audience that evening. At the end of the talk, as people were moving toward the exit, we happened to meet up. Frederick shared his irritation with the idea of writers taking liberties with works of art; he felt their interpretations represented a kind of violation.

I was taken aback by Frederick's reaction, as my thinking had been quite the opposite, namely, that an artist would be pleased to have his or her artwork serve as the inspiration for a poem. Yet I respected his perspective and, in continuations of the talk, added an acknowledgment of the one-way relationship of writer to artist.



Linden Frederick, "Rear Window" (2016), oil on linen, 36 x 36 inches

In a remarkable bit of irony, fifteen of Frederick's paintings now serve as prompts for short works of fiction by fifteen American writers, including the likes of Louise Erdrich, Ann Patchett, Richard Russo, Elizabeth Strout, Anthony Doerr, Lily King, Andre Dubus III, Lois Lowry, and Tess Gerritsen. The paintings, accompanied by short excerpts from the texts, are on view in [\*Linden Frederick: Night Stories\*](#) at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland.

Why Frederick? His paintings of desolate backstreets, nondescript roadways and down-on-their-heels homes and storefronts in rural Maine turn out to be excellent spurs for narrative. Frederick has always embraced the gritty side of Maine's towns, and the paintings in this show, all from 2016, confirm his stature as a master of the overlooked and under-sung. Like

certain Hopper paintings, they beg for storylines. Add the fact that all fifteen pieces are nocturnes and you have the makings of, well, multiple ekphrasms.



Linden Frederick, "Takeout" (2016), oil on linen, 36 x 36 inches

He loves the strands of Christmas lights left up long after New Year, like cheap finery on the facades of humble abodes. In "Takeout," generic Christmas decorations add sad cheer to a two-story building that houses the *Daily News* office and an empty fast food joint, the latter conjuring both Hemingway's "clean, well-lighted place" and Hopper's "Nighthawks."

The painter is also fond of the cheap, white vinyl display signs you see outside convenience stores. The one in "Ice" tells passersby, "WE ARE OPEN 8 – 11." This corner store with its outdoor ice cooler and its bank of dirty snow is a kind of ultima Thule of a godforsaken America. A similar store appears in "Police," its array of precisely rendered neon signs bringing to mind Richard Estes, if the photo-realist painter ever made a wrong turn.



Linden Frederick, "50 Percent" (2016), oil on linen, 36 x 36 inches

A blank vinyl sign sits to the right of a dress shop in "50 Percent," among the most engaging pieces in the show. A group of mannequins are visible in the illuminated showroom, like eerie figures out of a *Twilight Zone* episode. In Lois Lowry's "Vital Signs," the textual accompaniment to the painting, the sign is the object of scorn for members of the local athletic club, who plot to destroy it.

The painting "Mansard" sets Frederick squarely in the Hopper line of American art. Part of it is the subject; the gangly painter from Nyack, New York, loved New England's old sea captain mansions, often derelict, yet striking in their architectural nobility. Frederick displays his predecessor's ability to bring out the personality of an inanimate structure.



Linden Frederick, "Mansard" (2016), oil on linen, 36 x 36 inches

Frederick's paintings are unpeopled; it's the writers' job to bring the actors onto his bleak stages, and they do so with skill and pleasure, moving for the most part beyond the given scene and details of the paintings. For example, aside from the title it shares with Frederick's painting, Erdrich's text "Green Acres" is its own entity, a tender and twisted tale of a cow-obsessed woman and her husband and newborn "living in the flat routine" on Angus Avenue.

The paintings are perfectly square (36 by 36 inches) and hung at equal intervals around one of the CMCA's large spaces. Circling the room was like taking a tour of a Maine town where a small satellite dish on a roof, a liquor store with an ATM, a car repair shop, and a Save-A-Lot store represent the perks of civilization.



Linden Frederick, "Green Acres" (2016), oil on linen, 36 x 36 inches

The light in Frederick's paintings is remarkable. He can make the horizon glow without providing any warmth, as in "Offramp," or recreate the weak radiance of an entrance light, as in "Rear Window." He is a latter-day luminist, but one who prefers the chilled illumination of a moonless winter evening to a glorious sunset. The lighting is perfect for his theater of destitution.

**Linden Frederick: Night Stories** *continues at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (21 Winter St., Rockland, Maine) through November 5.*