Deconstructing the Perceived Realities of Maine's Identity:
A study in Painting and Photography
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The original premise of my project began with a few observations I had made about coastal Maine and tourism. Maine, like all tourist destinations, has a certain set of archetypal images that act as signifiers of place. The images of lighthouses, lobsters, and moose have been appropriated by the tourist industry as symbols of Maine’s very identity. Although this technique is very reasonable in terms of marketability, the commoditization of these specific images limits the scope of a visitor’s experience. A tourist in Maine will seek out lobster, moose, and lighthouses because they are familiar because these images and ideas have been prescribed for a visitor to Maine. However, when a tourist myopically seeks out one of these generalized experiences and images in order to fulfill their vacation fantasy, they are prone to lose touch with the complexity of the environment. Instead, tourists blindly seek a limited set of experiences that they already know.

This is what I had assumed about tourists, and I found myself trapped in a net of generalizations myself. This summer has expanded my initial assumptions of the tourist experience here in Maine. I started the summer spending time around tourists, photographing them in the act of experiencing the landscape and enjoying the environment. I tried to escape the temptation to take grand, sweeping shots of the coast, trying to stray away from the “postcard” aspect of Maine. The postcard effect takes specific moments and drains them of their individuality, changing a beautiful moment into an ideal landscape to be marketed.

At the start of the summer I worked to reverse this effect through paintings, taking postcards and my own snapshots and recreating them in paint. This served two purposes. First, by painting rapidly and in a large volume, I was able to get my hands moving and break into new areas of painting technically. Second, by reinvigorating the generic images, I began to recognize the true direction of my project. It occurred to me that the topic of tourism and perception of reality were simply too large and amorphous. However, the project itself could be boiled down to a simple premise; the disparity between general/generic visual moments and specific/individual moments.

As I continued to photograph tourists, I truly came to see that there is a certain earnestness and sincerity in their attempts to experience authenticity, however misguided their search may be, and the connection between individuals and the environment is a wondrous and transcendental event.

As I moved toward the end the summer I delved into these specific moments of connection. Seeing as I myself was a tourist, or at least a visitor, in many of the locations I photographed a painted, I looked into my own experience to find the specificity I was trying to describe. I decided to focus on the hypnotic motion of water, and tried to recreate the sensation of the moving water found at the coast. I began to work more abstractly, choosing to investigate the chaotic rhythms and forms of coastal water. This resulted in a number of very large paintings. This summer has been an incredible development of my style and artistic process. I learned to accept momentum and to work at my own pace and I am very happy with my results.

Faculty Mentor James Mullen
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