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Art review: Dozier Bell exhibit makes for a mystical experience

By Jorge S. Arango

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"Dozier Bell" at the Sarah Bouchard Gallery in Woolwich. *Photo courtesy of Sarah Bouchard Gallery*

Let me be unequivocal: Dozier Bell is a *great* artist. By that, I mean a master, as in someone whose work will be discussed and analyzed in art history curricula a century from now, just as we continue to discover new depths today in the works of Rembrandt or Dürer.

A further clarification: By master, I do not imply merely that Bell possesses masterful technical skill (though, without a doubt, her handling of acrylic, watercolor and charcoal is impossibly flawless). I

mean that she is more of an earthly, flesh-and-blood medium for transmitting the deepest, simplest truths of the universe and the transcendence possible when we surrender to them. She is not just painting beautiful pictures; she is taking on the grandest philosophical themes of existence.

But don't take my word for it. Instead, make a date to see "Dozier Bell" (through June 26) at Sarah Bouchard's appointment-only gallery in Woolwich. It is like being in a treehouse, immersed in the living green pulse of nature. Bouchard will leave you alone with the work, and in the ensuing utter silence and the dappled light streaming through the trees and into the gallery, it is possible that you might have a mystical experience.

Upon entering the gallery, my eye was drawn like a magnet to "22:00," an acrylic on canvas ostensibly depicting a night sky, the moon peeking out from behind the clouds. I say "ostensibly" because the light of that moon – from the pale yet radiant luminosity at its source to the diffuse aura it spreads throughout the upper half of the painting – felt like more than just a representation of natural phenomena. I could sense in it the presence of something divine.

"22:00" had the kind of religiosity that emanated from the paintings of 19th-century German artist Caspar David Friedrich. But Friedrich, like other Romantic artists, almost always composed his landscapes with human figures who, by witnessing nature, somehow made it real. Though these figures might have been tiny (to more moralistically imply the superfluosity of humanity against the awesomeness of nature), they nevertheless placed human existence and perception at the center of the cosmos.



Dozier Bell, "22:00," 30" x 50," acrylic on canvas, 2014 *Photo by Dave Clough Photography*

Bell, who lives in Waldoboro, eliminates the human witness entirely, transporting her works beyond the inherent inconsequence of humanity to a taste of spiritual transcendence. Her view is pantheistic:

Nature and all its phenomena represent actual manifestations of God. There is no need for humans at all. Many landscape painters do this, of course. But there is something more ephemeral and ethereal about Bell's aims.



Dozier Bell, "Elevation, 2," 52" x 48," acrylic on linen, 2022 *Photo by Dave Clough Photography*

Light is the primary vehicle for expressing the divine in Bell's paintings. Whether it is the persistence of sunlight through the mountain mists of "Elevation, 2," the glowing reflection of the moon on the water in "Across the lake," the smoldering orange light of the sun as it sinks behind the horizon in "Treeline, evening," or the light of dawn (or dusk) breaking through clouds in "Messalonskee marsh" – we know that what we are touching into with our perception of these works is a dimension far, far beyond the one in which we live our lives.



Dozier Bell, "Treeline, evening," 12" x 24," acrylic on panel, 2020 Photo by Dave Clough Photography

And here it must be noted that Bell achieves all these light effects through multiple media. "Elevation, 2" is acrylic on linen. "Treeline, evening" is acrylic on panel. "Across the lake" is (astonishingly) watercolor on paper. And "Messalonskee marsh" is charcoal on Mylar (you could look at it for hours and still question whether it is actually a black and white photograph).

The fact that all these means arrive at the same psychic and metaphysical ends only emphasizes the essential truth that the divine takes infinite forms because it not only permeates everything; *it is* everything. Further verification of this comes from the fact that this is accomplished at every scale. There is equal wonder and majesty radiating from the six-inch square "Midday" as the 52-by-48 glorious inches of "Elevation, 2."

In this sense, these works acknowledge the role of artist as interpreter. But Bell seems to understand that artists cannot claim the quality of creativity for themselves; that belongs to the universe. Rather, what they can "own" in the act of their expression is technical skill and the fact that they are a unique conduit, molded by their individual understanding and experience, for the dynamic, spontaneous creation of the universe. To be sure, there's masterfulness in the rendering of this truth, but it is always palpable in Bell's paintings that they are about something above and beyond human comprehension, and that they are not arrived at purely through human means.

In her artist's statement, Bell writes of being influenced by the German concept of *Heimsuchung*, a term that encompasses two extremes: "everyday union with the divine, and the devastation and annihilation of the physical self and/or its environment. Between these two poles is implied an omniscient being." The self, by its very nature, represents separateness. Every great spiritual tradition has recognized the need to surrender our sense of separateness to comprehend – and enter into – the deeper truth of our oneness with everything.

Moreover, Bell works most often from memory, not from a photograph or *en plein air*. These are not actual landscapes in the classical sense, but something conjured through "the filtering function of memory." In this process, she writes, "aspects of a scene that were incidental fall away, while some that were deeply sensed but not seen have an opportunity to manifest themselves in the painted image."

These two elements – the abdication of self and the openness to other dimensions of subtle reality – account for the profound sense of resolution and peace we feel as we gaze at each image. It is not just that the paintings are technically resolved, though one does intuit that moving a bird or a cloud a single millimeter in any direction might mar the image's impeccable composition. It is that Bell's process allows something more essential (the omniscience of that being) to arise and unify the painting – every tree, mist, cloud, hawk and blade of marsh grass – into its oneness with all forms of divine manifestation. Put another way, she describes her paintings as “armature(s) for the numinous.”



Dozier Bell, "Oculus, night clouds," 23" x 34," acrylic on canvas, 2018 *Photo by Dave Clough Photography*

A few of the paintings feature sight lines, as if nature is being observed through the lens of a telescope or, in the case of "Quadrant" and "Ten Knots," a periscope. In these images, Bell is concerned with the issue of surveillance. We could linger in the scariness and paranoia of this proposition.

However, if we contemplate what tools of surveillance attempt to achieve, we can also view them as metaphors for the limited perspective through which we struggle to make sense of the unfathomable, to focus on the micro instead of the macro. These works and two others – "Oculus, night clouds" and "Oculus, transit" – narrow our perception of the divine's immensity to something that is less overwhelming to the restrictions of our human brain. Viewing Bell's paintings strips away our illusions to reveal just how limited an organ of perception or brains truly are.

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