

# HELL BENT TO KICK THE EDGES

## CHELSEA ELLIS AND TODD WATTS AT MMPA PORTLAND

artscope

REVIEW

CHELSEA ELLIS AND  
TODD WATTS

MAINE MUSEUM OF  
PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS  
15 MIDDLE STREET A3  
PORTLAND, MAINE

THROUGH  
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When I say, "photographic arts," what or who comes to mind? Annie Leibovitz? Ansel Adams? Alfred Stieglitz? Richard Avedon? Different genres. Different styles. Different expressions. The two artists who are currently exhibiting works at the Maine Museum of Photographic Arts in Portland are creating work that has osmosed into a totally different expression of the genre. They are photographers, no doubt, and both have interest in sculpture. But all assumptions end there.

Todd Watts' works are represented in major museum collections — including the Art Institute of Chicago, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fogg Museum and Yale University Art Gallery. In his early days in art school, his interest was sculpture. He didn't own a camera until after he graduated, and he said that he's been learning photography ever since.



Chelsea Ellis, *Afflicta*, 2022, 60" x 40".

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He began making photos — he insists that he doesn't take photos, he makes them — in traditional black-and-white materials, but the world of color began calling his name and he became immersed in a process that he invented.

Watts began making color images using a process based on materials available from Kodak. He was invited by Hewlett Packard to see the earliest versions of digital printing at about the same time Kodak discontinued dye transfer materials. It was clear to him that he was looking at the future. Although he mostly uses analog cameras, his photographs are printed digitally.

His photo subjects and execution are nontraditional. His repertoire is wide-ranging, often very large scale, color photographs using both conventional and digital technologies. And the subjects? The message? That's for the viewer to discern.

A particularly fascinating work is a recent piece, "Now and Then." It's large — as most of his pieces are — 46" x 66". I'm not sure what is going on here. A toddler appears to be leaning on a monitor screen. The screen is a monochromatic beige color with people interacting. The perspective is elevated. We (and the toddler) are looking down on a crowd. Based on their surroundings, a convention perhaps with people at tables? But their attire makes one think it was maybe 40 years ago. A diagonal slash through the photo splits the lower section into a sea of intense blue. What is this adorable blonde child looking at? What does he (or she) see — in his perspective? His little hands straddle the screen as he seems entranced and looks on. So, what is the message? Hmmm, indeed. What is the message?

Watts, who lived most of his life in Manhattan before he married fellow artist, Jemma Gascoine, prior to them moving to Maine in 2000, is very opinionated about his work and his philosophy. "My pictures do not capture moments," he shared. "They are photographs, but they do not depict particular events. We don't need to know the histories surrounding a picture to add it to our personal history."

In every way, art and life are inseparable, he believes. An unexpected conversation may completely alter his assumptions. And he said it's the same way he makes art.

There's something about "Whirlwind" that makes me say, "Ahhhhh." Again, it's a massive "canvas" (a 46" x 66" digital print) that calls you to jump into the photo. A calming aqua sea beckons you to let go of the day's stress and sink into the enveloping solitude of the body of water as swirl with yellow fall maple leaves. And who are you to resist?

Watts' creativity doesn't stop from behind his camera lens. It often seeps out into his poetic encapsulation of an image in print — as in writing. He spoke of "Whirlwind" as a walk along a gravel road when his silence is interrupted by a grating

sound. A raucous sound. The trees shimmer. "Red leaves swirl up and twist higher, and higher still. It's a whirlwind, a dust devil. It roars and bends the air."

Watts speaks to his pictures, often out loud, and he said they whisper back. "The work is completed when the subject changes. The conversation remains encapsulated only in the work, to be continued by myself or by anyone else. After lunch perhaps, or during a long flight to Paris."

Numerous other works of his at this exhibition challenge our interpretation of photography — delightfully. "First Uncertainty" — another large-scale work — this one a monochromatic orange — depicts a surreal setting, ala Chesley Bonestell, an American science fiction and space illustrator ahead of his times. Watts' piece suggests an encounter on an uninhabited planet. Two figures at a distance approach each other, but nonthreateningly, invitingly even. Two large atmospheres loom upper and lower in the work, almost mirror-like. The surface the people stand on also reflects off a watery surface. What is the meaning? I don't know, but I like it. It's almost comforting. I want to be in the scene. The title makes us think there's hesitation, and yet we love being voyeurs for this unfolding landscape.

The other iconoclastic artist in this show, Chelsea Ellis, a Maine-born mid-30s photographer that currently lives and works in Rockland, Maine, causes you to step back and ponder. In her work, she uses her body and paint to create composite portraits of humanoid forms that blur the boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar, and posing the questions, "Who are we? What are we?"

Totally straying from traditional definitions of photography, she takes it to a place that questions reality. What is she saying? How does she do that? Ellis also works in an extravagantly large scale. Her work has appeared in numerous shows throughout Maine and in community art publications.

"To Ribbons," a 40" x 60" horizontal print of a monochromatic pink on darker pink, features three ribbons of body fragments of a strip spanning the hand, arm, up to the shoulder, down the side of the body to a well-articulated foot — rivaling the musculature of the sculpture "David."

What does she mean? What does it mean to you? Perhaps it's symbolic of our life being in shreds at times. Or maybe it's that life is so fragmented during different life stages.

Ellis more recently executed a sculpture piece (then photographed it) named "Primordium." It's a fantastic title! I love to hear why artists title their works because it's another extension of their creativity, and it also gives viewers some



Todd Watts, *First Uncertainty*, 2012, 66" x 46".

direction with where to go with it. I love "Primordium" — but what is it? No clue. I see it as an adorable munchkin — a paint blob with feet — a Star Wars re-invented creature that you need to take home and feed almonds.

But the work that I loved most of Ellis' in this exhibition was "Afflicta."

Desiring to have a more physical experience with her body, and to create photographic images that have the commanding presence of sculpture, she is drawn to using photography because of its unique power to imply a recorded reality. Often starting as sketches on paper and test shots of her body in different poses, the idea begins to build as a composite in her mind. She even builds sets, experiments with lighting, mixes body paint to perfection and then paints herself. Challenging and messy, the shoot is quite enjoyable for her. When she's attained the shots she wants, she combines them into a final composition.

"Afflicta" is one of those. Fragments of her body in a chartreuse yellow-green hue quite definable as a body seated on a basic wooden chair — the kind from when you were in grade school — sturdy and dull. There's a leg with toes touching the floor, foot artfully arched. An opposite knee is curled over the edge of the chair but attached to nothing. A hand braces her on the chair seat. Her left breast is exposed and a shoulder peeks out. And then the head with a penetrating dark eye — the focal point of the photo — seems to say, "Keep your distance."

What is she really saying? Are parts of us transparent? Are other aspects of our body denser, more challenging to read? Why those particular body parts? Whatever the answers, as an artist, Chelsea Ellis pushes herself to take risks and learn to hear her own voice in her work. What more could an artist aspire to?

However you react to Watts and Ellis' work, you must applaud that they aren't afraid to kick the edges and have the courage to do something different. They quietly dare the viewer to recast the expected and refocus our humdrum sameness on new perceptions.

Linda Sutherland