From The Dirt to The Skies

August 24 – October 4, 2019

About the Exhibition

From the Dirt to the Skies is a group exhibition featuring new works in painting, drawing, and printmaking from four of Main Street Arts' gallery artists — Pat Bacon, Chad Grohman, Meredith Mallwitz-Meyer, and Lanna Pejovic. The artwork is inspired by fog-laden lakes, wooded paths, gardens, and objects plucked from nature.

The four artists included in this exhibition were also included in a show last April called Cultivate. It was the launch of a new gallery program and Main Street Arts began representing a small group of artists from the region. Pat, Chad, Meredith, and Lanna have each been included in other exhibitions dating back to the start of the gallery in June of 2013.

"I sat down with each of the artists and asked them some questions about their work and what inspires them to make it. The interesting thing for me was seeing all of the overlap between these artists. From the motivation for making art in the first place, to the imagery, and color palette. We hope that you enjoy this exhibition and take the time to learn more about each artist by reading their Q and A."

— Bradley Butler, executive director and curator

Exhibition Dates: August 24 – October 4, 2019
Opening Reception: Saturday, August 24, 4–7 p.m.

Q: Can you talk about the work that is included in the show and what inspired it?

A: I like reflections, looking in through water, what's on the surface of water, what's below it. The same with mud. I ended up printing a lot of diptychs for this show and while the imagery isn't obvious, I feel like it's more readable as a diptych. Putting two images together makes the print a little more solid. As singular images I thought they were a little too nebulous, a little too "floaty". Showing them as diptychs gives the imagery a little more grounding and makes them more readable. I'd like the work to transcend what it obviously is but I don't want to make it so mysterious or so unrecognizable. It has to have some recognition, there has to be some point of reference. The singular pieces are from walks in the woods and my response to what I saw.

Q: Where did the diptych idea come from?

A: I felt the singular images were incomplete. If I'm looking at 50 images, two will seem to relate to me and inform each other and I'm hoping it does for someone else also. Why did I pick "those two" that seem to inform each other? You always have design considerations because you want it to look like two singular images but read as one statement but it's an intuitive process. "The Garden" is a triptych, it just needed that balance. It had more of a cathedral effect with the corn on either side of the greenhouse.

Q: How does the work in this show differ from previous work? They definitely seem like related themes and images from past work but they are also different and new.

A: I have a new press and it's bigger, I think that has something to do with it. To have more plate surface to work with building textures helps me. I was very happy with the burn piles and trees that I was working with last year and I felt that they worked well as singular, standalone images or statements. These just work better as diptychs.

Q: What is on your mind while you're working?

A: I collect all of my images, mostly on my iPhone and sometimes on my camera. As I'm looking through them, I sort out what I'm intrigued with most and then I'm looking at 100 images and they just seem to really speak to me. From there, it's a process of deciding which ones I want to pull together. Sometimes I know that there are things going on in the world or in my life that is affecting those choices on a certain level, a more intuitive level. If people relate to my work, they relate to it on their own level with what's going on in their own life. I don't want to tell them exactly how to read it.

Q: Can you talk about a specific piece that is included in the show?

A: The one piece that evolved over the course of four years, is "Reflection". I had done it originally using contact prints in the darkroom and I liked it that way. I also used this image in a triptych, and in a collage but I was never satisfied with the outcome. Then, when I got my larger press I was able to do it as a double plate and I thought to myself, "Yes, this is how I always wanted to do it". Through the manipulation of the plate I was able to draw out certain textures and tones that I wanted to come forward.

For me, this piece has to do with transitions. Between one thought and another, between parts of your life, aging. I'm looking down from the bridge and you can see my reflection in the water and the textures you see are animal prints in the mud. The bridge is on the western edge of Lake Ontario, almost to Lake Erie. I stopped at a small pull off just to look at the lake and I noticed there was a bridge on the road and I walked down the bridge and I realize there was this amazing pattern of tracks in the mud and I had to photograph it. The image just seemed so important to me.

Q: You work largely in black and white but there is always a tone, or a cast of warm or cool to your blacks. Can you talk about your color mixing?

A: "Garden" has yellow ochre and heavy Portland black. With "Reflection", I used Portland black and Cerulean blue. What's nice about photogravure is that you establish your palette and then you open a can of black, open the ocre, the blue — depending if you're going to go warm or cool—black just has such a nice voice between warm and cool as you respond to the image. A lot of these images I have done very warm or done very cool until I really hit on the black that I like. That's why a lot of them are monoprints instead of editions. I respond to the plate differently every time I ink it, like a painter. And I want the ink to be heavy enough that you can smell it! Ink is very sensual and tactile, just like paint is. With the heavy texture you can feel that, I want it lo look heavy and substantial.

Q: How does your environment impact your work?

A: I live in the country and have for the past 40 years or so. I find that even when I'm in an urban environment, I'm taking pictures of the weeds in the sidewalk or the corner of a building that is deteriorating. I can't seem to capture the essence of what is urban, that's why I like to look at urban photographs and paintings, those artists are capturing the vision of where they live, and that's different from where I live.

I travel the state quite a bit and I get to stop in a lot of very rural places and take photographs, like the overgrown greenhouse in "Garden", I just found it in a field and shot it. It was a nice unexpected thing to come across. I was so intrigued with this greenhouse and took about 20 shots and then I moved on and do something else. A month later I pulled those images out and start looking at them, pinning them up on the wall in the studio and then finding other images to go with it. The greenhouse on its own seemed so incomplete to me. I printed it singular but it just didn't work for me. The corn images on either side of the greenhouse inform it on a design level with the cathedral effect of the tunnel of corn leaves and the architecture of the building. It also brings forward the idea of the greenhouse effect, global warming, and the earth coming back and overcoming manmade structures.

When I find images that work together it's not a concrete thing right away, I don't set out to make a statement about climate change. The substance or meaning comes through over time and you just know it when you see it. That process is pretty intuitive and sometimes I look at a print a year after I made it and say "wow, that says it for me". Your work sometimes is ahead of your life and you can't read it yourself for another 6 months or a year.

Q: Talk about your studio

A: My new press is in the barn studio next to my house. It was a cold spring, so in April I could print out there using a hot plate to warm the ink. Hopefully I'll be able to use it up through November and then I'll move into the house and use my smaller press.

Q: What inspired you to make this body of work and how is it different from other work you've shown here in the past?

A: With work I've shown in the past at Main Street Arts, I am usually focusing on landscapes and trying to show "the big picture", the larger view. There are a couple of paintings like that included in this show but what's different about the other pieces is that I am focusing more on specific branches and the fruits and vegetable that comes from the branches. A little more focus to provide more intimacy with the natural world.

Stylistically it is done different as well. To differentiate from previous paintings I tried painting smaller objects with bigger brushes, bringing the viewer closer into the individual object of nature rather than providing a larger scope of nature.

Q: What's on your mind when you're making your work?

A: The act of painting a specific object with more focus requires more focused thought. So when I'm painting a landscape that's seen from across a lake for example, I'm trying to get a sense of the day in the entire landscape, even if I'm not physically capturing all of what I'm seeing. With this group of paintings,I'm really focusing on what the object is and where it came from. For example, in the painting "Organics" we ate those things after I painted them. So there's a definite connection to our everyday lives. We have an organic share that we get, so these are things that I'm coming into physical contact with and so I'm remembering those moments or appreciating the work that went into the harvesting and everything else that goes along with providing organic food to a community. This series is really about community.

Q: Can you talk about a specific piece that is included in the show?

A: The painting called “Pieces of Hiking” is one that I’m the closest to. My wife Kristen and I were going on a hike and I was looking for things that were interesting as we were walking. Whether its specific plants pointed out by Kristen who is an herbalist or maybe something laying next to that plant. I remember that day so clearly and I remember coming home after the hike and starting that painting right away. I feel like out of all of the paintings in the show, that’s the one I think of first from the group.

“Organics” brings back a memory as well but not as vivid. The tomatoes and peppers were good and made a nice addition to our dinner but “Pieces of Hiking” reminds me more of the day I had with my wife, talking about plants. So I’m closer to that one because the memory is about personal interaction, which is important. With this series of paintings I’m trying to bring people into the work rather than having them looking from across an expanse to see something.

Q: Your color palette shifted a bit in this series, can you talk about that?

A: I hadn’t worked in this way before. I started each piece with a very bright and saturated underpainting of magenta. First, I used this as a way to unify everything. And also, I liked the way it affected the color balance of warm and cool. Then it also started to serve as a way of covering and revealing things. I stayed with the pink color even though I had planned to do some paintings with a blue underpainting. I felt like the pink color really brought joy to the work. I feel that these objects and these things I’ve painted should be celebrated and I feel like the bright pink added to that positive approach to looking at nature.

Q: How does your environment impact your work?

A: I live in a rural environment and I’m involved in the community through our various activities. We organize in our community to bring people together and a lot of it has to do with how we’re interacting with nature. Whether that’s through plants or beneficial action to aid the community, like a clean up or something like that. All of these things require us to be in nature and to be around these objects. We aren’t just getting together, we are getting together in nature. Every time we do it involves observing our environment.

Q: When you're painting these natural objects and images, you aren't painting them on site, you're taking photos and bringing them back and working in your studio, right?

A: That's right. I'm always using photographs. I appreciate plein air painters and I do that sometimes too but that's not my standard practice. I'm an illustrator so that's just the way I'm comfortable working, in the studio using references.

What's funny is that this is the first time I've painted vertically using an easel! Normally, I work flat on a table. That's a huge difference and I was very comfortable and welcomed the change.

Q: Talk about the paintings and what inspired them.

A: Different trips or experiences or places I have been to over the past year or so. Places I have been that I have experienced and I just found to be really beautiful that just struck me in a way, whether it be the light or a number of different things. It's usually the light that is the number one thing that really gets me. They were just places that I loved and took photographs of and then based on my photos and my memories and sketches that I did there in the moment, I took all those things and started paintings based on them. In the end, the painting takes on almost a memory sort of feel. To summarize it all, they all start from I place I have been, a place that I saw and they all are located around the Finger Lakes area.

Q: Is this inspiration and process different than what has happened for you in the past or has this always been your process?

A: It's been a consistent process. It's a series I started about 10 years ago now that has just continued to work for me. It's been consistent, they have all started the same way. Now that I know my process a bit better, I know when I see something and know where it's going to go. I can do the research and do all the things that I need in order to get a good strong painting from it.

Q: What is on your mind when you're working? Is there a conscious "trying to remember" things about the place?

A: Yeah! The most important thing for me is that I need peace and quiet. I need to be working by myself with no interruptions. It's rare that I have just one photograph, I usually take a few so that I can see the way the light changes and I can put it all together to create what I think is the most compelling, strongest look. I have all those photos in front of me, whether it's on the

computer or printed out, and I usually have a vision board. And that's really it. If I have music going it's nothing distracting, it's just something quiet in the background.

Q: The painting "Sonnenberg Tribute" depicts nature in a different way than most of your other work. Can you talk about what caused that shift and if that's something you'll be doing more of?

A: I want to do more of that going forward. I used to live down the road from Sonnenberg Gardens in Canandaigua and I would take walks through there. I love all the trees on the property, they are absolutely beautiful. One day I heard a story from someone who worked there that Mary Clark Thompson—she and her husband built the mansion at Sonnenberg—used to plant a tree in honor of every guest that she had back when she lived there. I thought that was a really cool thing, what a great way to honor a guest. I thought that deserved a painting, so I found a tree that stood out really proud and I wanted to treat it almost like a portrait but still really get that washy luminescent layers in there. I definitely hope to take this further.

Q: Can you talk about your color palette? Are these colors you have seen in the skies or are they more amplified?

A: They are colors that I have seen in the sky but they are definitely amped up. I love the soft color palette from nature but I really enjoy being able to change it and put my own take on it. It's important to me to not be painting exactly what I see. I want it to be a little bit more of a personal experience, I think this interpretation is really important.

Q: How does your environment impact your work?

A: Oh gosh, I think my environment impacts me more than I even realize. I think going back through my paintings and remembering where the inspiration came from reminds me how much my environment influences me. I love landscapes so the Finger Lakes region always seems to be my subject matter. And it just happens to be that way. I don't necessarily plan it to be that way it just kind of happens. So I think that because I live in such a beautiful area and the light is really beautiful and the weather and the clouds, there's always a dramatic change in the light you can get from one moment to the next. It has a huge, huge impact on my work.

Q: Were you working in a different studio space this summer, what was it like being out of your usual set up?

A: I had a completely empty large room, no finished flooring or walls so it freed me up a little bit which is important. I was able to just get things started and let the paint fly and I didn't have any reservations. It became a really freeing experience. So having that space and having that freedom, not just the physical space but also not having to worry about getting anything dirty, I think it was a great exercise for me. It loosened up my flow of how I work a little bit more.

I was able to work on several pieces at once because I had the space which is typically how I like to work it's just not always the most practical thing for me. I had all of the work in this show out while I was working on another one so I could pull from all of those. It's important for me when I am having a show to make sure there is cohesion and a common thread through one piece to another and that they all work nicely together but still have their own identities.

This space granted me all those things which was really wonderful. It has beautiful light as well, it was a big open space with sliding glass doors and a big open backyard in the back. It was the perfect scenario.

Q: Can you talk about the work included in the show and what inspired it? Is there a theme running through the work?

A: The paintings in this show are more focused on flower gardens. Much of my previous work deals with the larger spaces found in the broader landscape. Even if I'm painting a garden, I'm normally more interested in the space of the garden, not the flowers themselves. For whatever reason I felt more like being right in the flowers, so that's what I focused my attention on.

Q: What is on your mind while you're working?

A: It often depends on the mood of the day but I am focusing on specific gardens. Memories of being in these specific places because it isn't a generic idea of a garden, the memories come from my experience being in a garden. When I get ready to paint I think about the color mood of that day. Its a conversation with the painting about the color mood of that particular day.

Q: When you're recalling these gardens in your memory, are you trying to hold onto one specific image? Or do the images keep passing through in your mind?

A: I try to hold on to the image and go back to the same space in my mind. Two of the paintings included in this show are from the most intensive garden experience I've had, which is at Linwood Gardens. Linwood is a big place so it has all kinds of spaces that are very planned out, yet not rigid. Flowers and vegetables are planted together and continue to grow there all summer long. That's where I spent some time a couple of years ago and I try to go back to that mental space while I'm painting, that combined with photos I took. Since I never did drawings in the garden, I am doing that now. Making charcoal drawings in the current

mood I'm in which is a more linear and scribbly way of defining details of what I've seen. I try to revitalize my experience of the garden first in charcoal and then move towards oil paint.

Q: You have 3 oil paintings in the show along with 8 small pastel drawings, can you talk about the pastels?

A: Those were totally unplanned. I was thinking about a generalized idea of the garden, thinking of a poetic mood about a garden. Trying to not be specific, and not adding specific garden elements. Since they are very small, I couldn't use the same gestural technique I'm using on the paintings. I didn't have a specific image that I wanted and I like the ones best that are more diffused. Those are the ones that bring me back to the sensory experience of being in the garden. I focused on laying some color down, smudging the pastels and seeing what memories that might trigger. From there I would draw back into it, which was an unplanned gesture of the moment. I went through lots of paper, you never know if that gesture or that color combination will be successful. With pastels, you can only go so far with layering colors before you aren't able to be brought to any kind of conclusion.

Q: Can you talk about your color palette for these pieces?

A: I'm very affected by what's going on around me, I don't work in a vacuum. I am aware of the landscape around me. As a landscape painter I am very much affected by the weather, the light, and the mood of the day. Paintings take their own course sometimes and you decide whether to follow it and support it or whether you will deny it. Letting certain colors in to the composition and then reacting to those colors.

I have been making an effort recently to rely less on blues and greens in my paintings. Those colors are so prevalent in our area, especially this time of year, it tends to dull the senses in a way. You can't feel anything fresh about the garden. So I ask myself, how can I refresh the idea of being in a place that is a garden? I like winter gardens and I like the fall and a lot of the pastels are fall colors, somehow they kept coming out in the pastel drawings. I find the fall and winter to be more inspiring times of the year.

Q: How does your environment impact your work?

A: The kind of painter I am, I am very sensitive to the lyrical mood or sound of the day. That in combination with my own mood, ends up having an effect on my dialog with that particular painting on that day.

Q: Can you talk about your studio practice and how do you balance working on-site vs. being in the studio?

A: It's hard being outside working on-site but I feel that it's necessary, whether I'm just making a sketch or a full painting, that's where I get the real experience of being there. Otherwise the finished painting wouldn't have the sense of immediacy that I'm after. The symbolic and formal idea that has come out of my relationship to landscape. It's more authentic for me to show the immediacy of the moment of being there, or a series of moments. The light is always changing, everything is changing.

I found some drawings I did 35 years ago, very carefully done with layers of accumulation. They are small sketches but they are so fine, I thought "was I ever that quiet and calm working out there?". I feel like now everything is moving so fast, even though I am out there in the quiet landscape. I feel like the time is going and I have to keep responding to it. Capturing the changing moments I've experienced in a place is important to me now. So the paintings I make in the studio have to feel that way and having actually spent time somewhere helps me to capture the freshness and immediacy of a place.