

The Boston Globe

ART REVIEW

Progressive, provocative landscapes on view at Fitchburg



SANDY LITCHFIELD AND CARROLL AND SONS GALLERY

Sandy Litchfield's "Shadow Ranger" is part of the "Land Ho!" exhibit at Fitchburg Art Museum.

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 11, 2015

FITCHBURG — "Land Ho!" at the Fitchburg Art Museum places works by eight New England landscape artists among landscape paintings from the museum's collection. The contemporary works — playful, fractured, epic, focused on tiny details — have a conceptual edge.

With a few exceptions, the older paintings are not a distinguished group. But they do help us to see that landscapes have always been a form of conceptual art, representing concepts about nature and its relationship to society, as well as ideas about painting, and what a painting should accomplish.

In American painting in the past two centuries, landscapes have progressed from the Hudson River School's romanticized notions of wilderness — filled with potential — to the more intimate fever dream rendered by modernists such as Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Arthur Dove. In the last 50 years, landscapes have become more politically charged in response to the way we have battered the environment.

Curator Mary M. Tinti has installed some of the works salon style on a couple of walls, inviting us to chart associations and changes through the years. One such grouping includes an elegant, vaporous abstraction by Helen Frankenthaler, a couple of bucolic scenes by Massachusetts painters Henry Hammond Gallison and Arthur Goodwin, who worked in the late 19th and early 20th century, and contemporary works by Sandy Litchfield and Shona Macdonald.

Litchfield paints fictional landscapes, skewing perspective, playing with space and simplifying form like a modernist, pushing landscape toward abstraction. In her "Shadow Ranger," dreamy blue and green mountains loom behind indulgent swipes of yellow, green, and blue. A wedge of civilization winks near the bottom, tiny houses and roads as we might view them from a plane. The delight in paint, and the suggestion that this is a dream and not a place, links her to Frankenthaler.