

ART REVIEW

"Tenacious" at UNE Art Gallery. E2

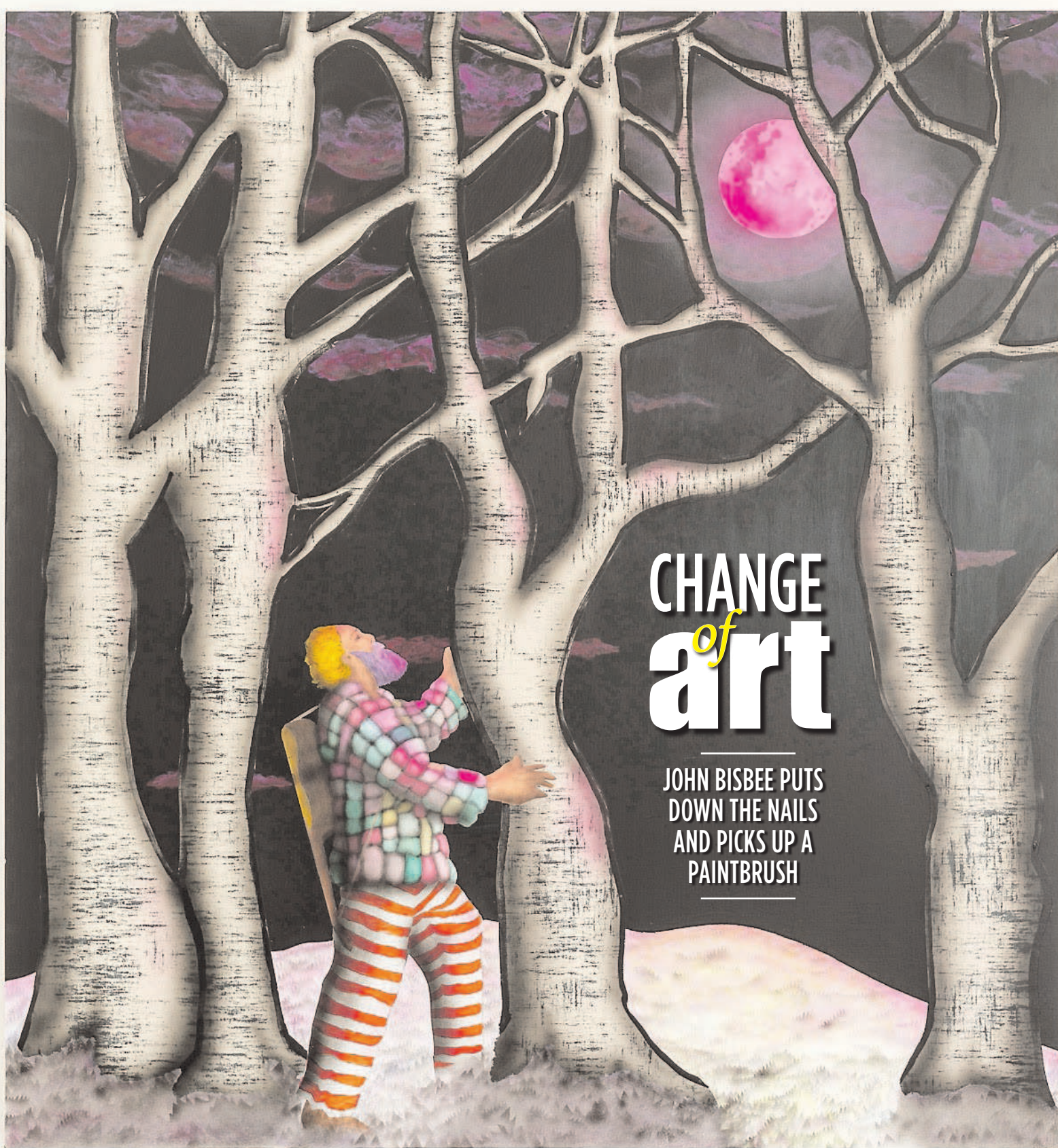
# AUDIENCE

Deep Water/E3  
Calendar/E3

Sunday, April 2, 2023

Maine Sunday Telegram

SECTION E



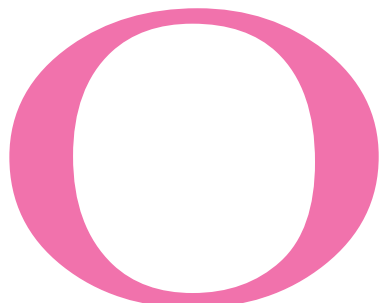
## CHANGE *of* art

JOHN BISBEE PUTS DOWN THE NAILS AND PICKS UP A PAINTBRUSH

John Bisbee, "Birch Song," 2022, acrylic on canvas, 71 x 66 inches

Courtesy of Moss Galleries

By MEGAN GRAY  
Staff Writer



In one wall of John Bisbee's studio in Brunswick is a painting of a duck holding a guitar. In capital letters, he wrote, "Can I learn to fly twice?"

That question is the one Bisbee is trying to answer. He spent more than 30 years making sculptures out of steel nails – and only nails. During the pandemic, he abandoned not just his singular material but also his entire medium. He turned instead to painting, and the first show of the next phase of his career is now on display at Moss Galleries in Portland.

The shift seems dramatic but reflects his lifelong desire to explore new possibilities in his work. Bisbee took the nail in every direction he could, and then he found a new direction for himself.

"Always be peaking," said Bisbee, 56. "But as soon as you get to that peak, always be jumping. If there's no risk, who cares?"

Elizabeth Moss, the gallery owner, has known Bisbee for years and agreed to host a show before she had

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Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

For three decades John Bisbee built sculptures out of nails (and only nails), but during the pandemic, he made an abrupt shift to painting and is now showing his first works at Moss Galleries in Portland.



Courtesy of Moss Galleries

John Bisbee, "St. Emilie," acrylic on canvas, 58 x 48 inches



Courtesy of Moss Galleries

John Bisbee, "Me With Beads," 2022, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 inches



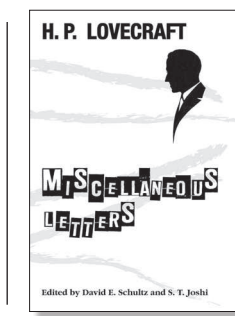
Courtesy of Moss Galleries

John Bisbee, "The Royal Guard," 2022, acrylic on canvas, 79 x 59 inches

**"The paintings totally make sense in that they capture this aspect of him that is a colorful, wild way of being in the world."**

PAINTER **EMILIE STARK-MENNEG**, BISBEE'S PARTNER

# Books



## NEW ON THE SHELF

**"MISCELLANEOUS LETTERS,"** by David E. Schultz and S.T. Joshi, Hippocampus Press, \$25: H.P. Lovecraft has become a flash point. He can be reprehensibly racist and misogynistic, and yet there's no denying his fiction's originality and visionary power. Schultz and Joshi have been assembling, editing and annotating Lovecraft's correspondence in multiple volumes. The latest, "Miscellaneous Letters," again shows the "Sage of Providence" as funny, self-mocking, shrewd and exceptionally painstaking in answering his mail. In one, talking about the supernatural, he frankly confesses that "I think this kind of thing fascinates me all the more because I don't believe a word of it!" — *THE WASHINGTON POST*

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## Best-Sellers

### FICTION HARDCOVER

1. **"Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow,"** by Gabrielle Zevin (Knopf)
2. **"The Midnight Library,"** by Matt Haig (Viking)
3. **"Birnam Wood,"** by Eleanor Catton (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)
4. **"I Have Some Questions for You,"** by Rebecca Makkai (Viking)
5. **"Big Truck Little Island,"** by Chris Van Dusen (Candlewick)
6. **"Petra,"** by Marianna Coppo (Tundra)
7. **"The Snowy Day,"** by Ezra Jack Keats (Viking)
8. **"What's in My Truck,"** by Roger Priddy (Priddy)
9. **"Goodnight Moon,"** by Margaret Wise Brown (Harper)
10. **"The Adventures of Amina Al-Sirafi,"** by Shannon Chakraborty (Harper)

### PAPERBACK

1. **"Night of the Living Rez,"** by Morgan Talty (Tin House)
2. **"The Guest List,"** by Lucy Foy (William Morrow)
3. **"Rules for Visiting,"** by Jessica Francis Kane (Penguin)
4. **"Klara and the Sun,"** by Kazuo Ishiguro (Vintage)
5. **"The Secret History,"** by Donna Tartt (Vintage)
6. **"My Year of Rest & Relaxation,"** by Ottessa Moshfegh (Penguin)
7. **"We Ride Upon Sticks,"** by Quan Barry (Vintage)
8. **"The Song of Achilles,"** by Madeline Miller (Ecco)
9. **"Penny,"** by Karl Stevens (Chronicle)
10. **"Severance,"** by Ling Ma (Picador)

### NONFICTION HARDCOVER

1. **"Poverty, By America,"** by Matthew Desmond (Crown)
2. **"Wolfish,"** by Erica Berry (Flatiron)
3. **"Rough Sleepers,"** by Tracy Kidder (Random House)
4. **"Wintering,"** by Katherine May (Riverhead)
5. **"The Language of the Universe,"** by Colin Stuart (Big Picture)
6. **"Under Water, Under Earth,"** by Aleksandra Mizielinska (Big Picture)
7. **"Reading the Glass,"** by Elliot Rappaport (Dutton)
8. **"Awe,"** by Dacher Keltner (Penguin)
9. **"The Light We Carry,"** by Michelle Obama (Crown)
10. **"Cobalt Red,"** by Siddharth Kara (St. Martin's)

### PAPERBACK

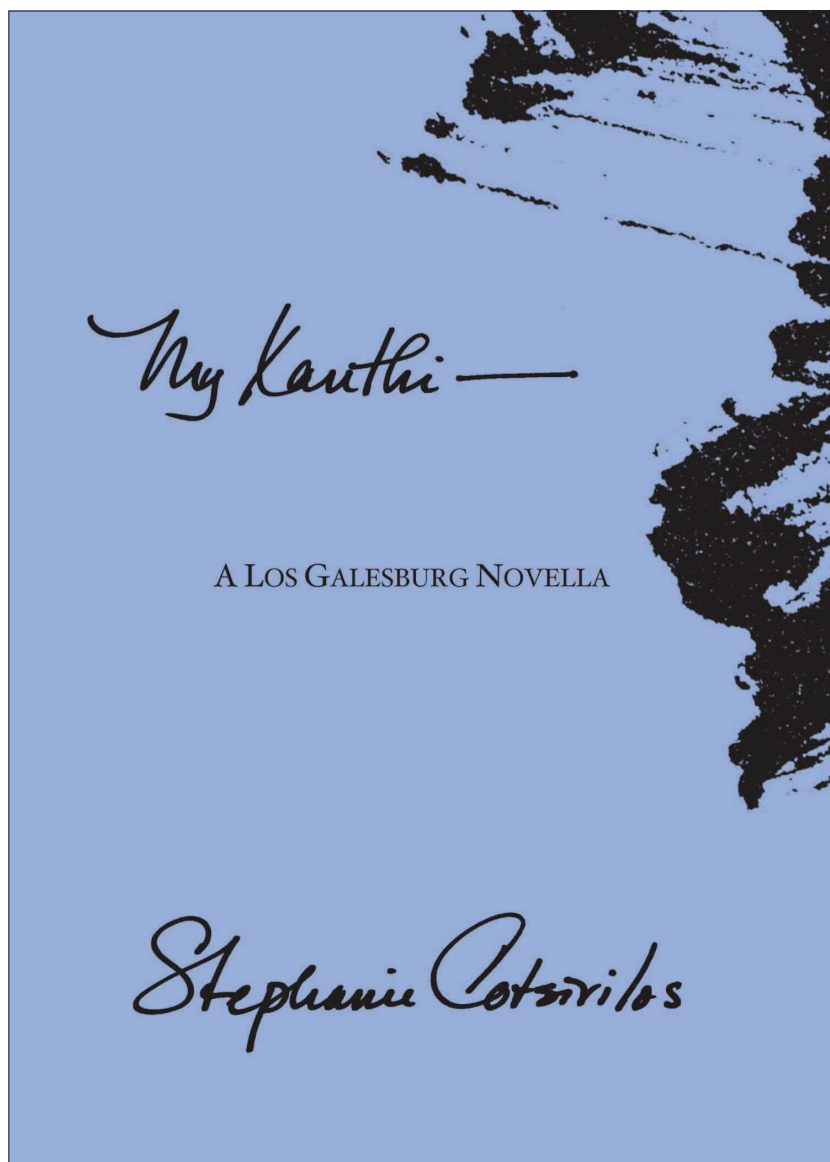
1. **"Downeast,"** by Gigi Georges (Harper)
2. **"Several Short Sentences about Writing,"** by Verlyn Klinkenborg (Vintage)
3. **"The Body Keeps the Score,"** by Bessel Van Der Kolk (Penguin)
4. **"Take It Easy,"** by John Duncan (Islandport)
5. **"The Urge,"** by Carl Erik Fisher (Penguin)
6. **"The Zen of Therapy,"** by Mark Epstein (Penguin)
7. **"Finding the Mother Tree,"** by Suzanne Simard (Vintage)
8. **"A Swim in a Pond in the Rain,"** by George Saunders (Random House)
9. **"The Carrying,"** by Ada Limón (Milkweed)
10. **"Every Tool's a Hammer,"** by Adam Savage (Atria)

— Longfellow Books, Portland

## LOCAL REVIEW

# A resilient Greek nanny changes the course of her young charge's life

In 'My Xanthi,' a now-adult Nick reads his nanny's old letters and comes face to face with the brutality of her life in wartime Greece.



By FRANK O SMITH

If you're lucky, every once in a while you come across a book that overcomes you with its powerful story.

"My Xanthi," from first-time novelist Stephanie Cotsirilos, did that for me.

The novella is narrated by Nick Bolinas, a 66-year-old lawyer, paunchy and slightly balding, who is in private practice in suburban Riverside, California. A Greek-American, Nick lives with his wife Janet and their twin teenage daughters in a neighborhood with other Greek families, including many relatives.

One of the girls, Tess, is outraged that her father defends accused rapists and murderers. His wife, too, has strong opinions about many things. She's feisty and not shy about challenging her husband when they disagree. Justice is a huge issue with Tess, who is attempting to write an essay about her father's work. Justice is equally important to Nick. He is committed to ensuring that all individuals, no matter their crimes, receive competent legal representation.

Nick receives a packet of old letters from Greece, sent to him by Koula, the daughter of Xanthi, a woman who came to America to serve as a nanny when he was 4

and his mother was diagnosed with cancer. When she arrived at the train station in Chicago in 1954, dressed all in black, Xanthi spoke almost no English. "I am finally letting go of my mother's letters," Koula, now a mother herself, writes to Nick. "I think these letters should stay with you."

The book shifts in time, relating the stories of Nick's

**"MY XANTHI"** by Stephanie Cotsirilos. Los Galesburg Press, 175 pages. \$15

life in Riverside, his childhood under the firm but loving hand of Xanthi, and his reading of the letters she wrote at the time to her young daughter in Greece, whom she supported with her wages in America. The novella's heart lies in the "packet of old letters (that) sits in my drawer like an unexploded incendiary device," Nick states. "She raised me, taught me deeply, unconsciously... Xanthi prepared me to fight for even my most damaged defendants."

One evening, when Nick's parents are out, the boy wanders down to her room. Xanthi beckons him in, lifts him up on the bed, and then

Please see **NANNY**, Page E6

# Three decades after her sister's murder, a writer seeks justice

In 1990, Liliana Rivera Garza was killed in Mexico. In 'Liliana's Invincible Summer' her sister, Cristina, sets out to figure out what happened.

By ERIKA L. SANCHEZ  
Special To The Washington Post

Liliana Rivera Garza was many things all at once — an insatiable writer, a talented swimmer, a movie lover, a devoted friend, a budding architect and an absolute feminist who loved smoking cigarettes. She dreamed of traveling and collecting experiences on her own. When she was 20, she took the first steps toward fulfilling that dream, moving to Azcapotzalco, Mexico City, where she began studying architecture at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana.

On July 16, 1990, Liliana was found dead in her apartment. She was killed by an ex-boyfriend, who had stalked her for many years. By the time an arrest warrant was filed months later, he was nowhere to be found. Nearly 30 years later, her older sister, the writer Cristina Rivera Garza, set out to recover a record of her sister's life — and death. The trail, such as it was, had mostly evaporated, but Garza was determined to capture her sister's last months and days. "I want to find

the murderer and I want him to pay for his crime," she writes in her powerful new book, "Liliana's Invincible Summer." "I seek justice."

Garza realizes that her pursuit is daunting, if nearly impossible, but her determination is unflappable. She may never find

**"LILIANA'S INVINCIBLE SUMMER: A SISTER'S SEARCH FOR JUSTICE"** by Cristina Rivera Garza. Hogarth, 320 pages. \$28

what she is seeking, but writing about the process is a kind of conjuring of the sister she lost. An artful catharsis. Her words come together in a book that is not so much plot-driven but rather a very careful excavation. Garza, a celebrated author and distinguished professor at the University of Houston, literally retraced her sister's footsteps as a young college student to better understand her world before her death. The reader is privy to photographs and other ephemera left behind. The most minute details contain multitudes. Every

word counts.

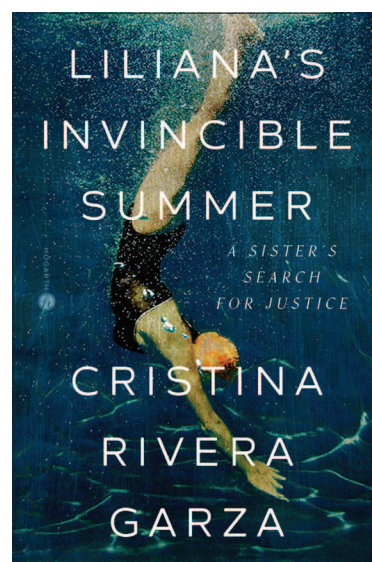
Throughout her journals, Liliana wrote extensively about her desire for freedom: "I am a seeker I want to try new things; maybe more pain and loneliness but I think it would be worth it." She longed for independence and often pondered why it was so difficult to simply exist as she was. Liliana's ultimate goal was to belong to herself, to be the architect of her own life. Relationships with men were fraught because many of them resented this core part of her identity.

How many women will read about Liliana and see themselves? How many of us will shudder thinking of a dangerous partner from the past? How many of us will realize that we're still on this Earth by sheer luck? Life has always been so precarious for women. It's difficult to find a time in history in which we've been safe. As Garza writes, "The only difference between my sister and me is that I never came across a murderer."

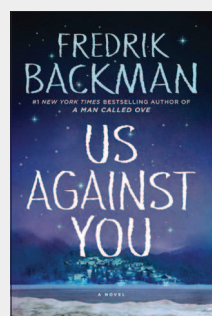
Thousands of years of human civilization, and women are still murdered with abandon all over

the world. In this case, in one of the largest cities on the planet. Mexico is not safer than when Liliana left it. Far from it. On average, 10 Mexican women or girls are killed daily across the country. Women's bodies are often disposed of in public places to send a message. Between Jan-

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## Bedside Table: Readers' Book Picks

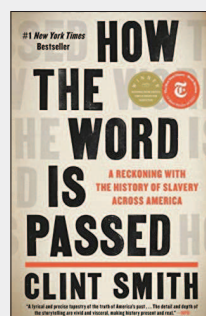


"I'm currently bouncing back and forth between two:

"**'Us Against You,'** the second book in Fredrik Backman's Beartown trilogy. It's still hockey season and Backman writes compellingly about a small rural town that runs (for better and for worse) on hockey. It's filled with great characters, rivalries, politics and small (and large) kinds of violence on and off the ice.

"Clint Smith's **'How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning With the History of Slavery Across America.'** Smith writes deeply and eloquently about seven different places in this country and examines the long tail of slavery and how it has seeped into so much of what we do and think and how we conceive of ourselves."

— GIBSON FAY-LEBLANC, executive director, Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance



Mainers, please email to tell us about the book on your bedside table right now. In a paragraph or two, describe the book and be sure to tell us what drew you to it. We want to hear what you are reading and why. Send your selection to pgrudinsky@pressherald.com, and we may use it as a future Bedside Table.

# Portland Museum of Art premieres Third Thursday

The new monthly event drew 500 people.

Five hundred people enjoyed the Portland Museum of Art's first Third Thursday on March 16, capturing the community's love of First Friday art walks and happy hour hangouts all in one place.

"It's kind of like First Friday's little sister," said Hannah LaSala of Portland. "And it has inspired me to get a membership again."

The lower levels of the museum had a festival-like atmosphere, with family-friendly activities, a pop-up beaded jewelry shop by Loxley Designs, food from Fred's Fried Dough and Mr. Tuna, drinks by The Black Tie Company and deejay Double Dessert spinning cool vibes.

"Music brings more life to the galleries," said Cait Sherrick of Portland.

Many guests visited the architectural model of the museum's expansion, the 2023 Youth Art Month exhibition in collaboration with Maine Art Education Association (closing April 2), and featured exhibit "American Perspectives:

Stories from the American Folk Art Museum" (runs through May 7). "There's a diverse crowd partying in the museum," said Michelle Doyle of Portland. "This is what they're trying to do, build community into what the museum is."

While the first Third Thursday was free for the first 500 people to register online, future events will be free for members, \$5 per person for nonmembers (with financial support provided by Evergreen Credit Union). Each Third Thursday will feature different artists and vendors, whether the museum brings a "craftroom," a weeknight concert or a film premiere. The next one is 5-8 p.m. April 20.

"We want to introduce a new audience to the museum with a different atmosphere," said Ashleigh Hill McKown, director of philanthropy. "And hopefully gain some new members."

Amy Paradysz is a freelance writer and photographer based in Scarborough. She can be reached at amyparadysz@gmail.com.



AMY PARADYSZ  
SOCIETY NOTEBOOK



Photos by Amy Paradysz  
Vera Komisarjevsky of Cape Elizabeth and Allison Green of South Portland.



Kate Buzzell and Aaron Wilcox of South Portland.



Cait Sherrick, Annie Osborne and Emily Rand, all of Portland.



Natasha Boada of Scarborough and Kelsey Harfoush of South Portland.



Lalita MacDonnell of Portland and museum employee Mitch Asanza of Portland.



Natasha and Bryan Plourde of North Yarmouth with Avery, 3, and Alexander, 5.



Greater Portland Landmarks Executive Director Sarah Hansen and Portland Downtown Executive Director Cary Tyson.



Board member Kyo Bannai of Yarmouth, Jessica Tomlinson of Portland, board member Cyrus Hage of Portland, board member Eileen Gillespie of Scarborough and Marlena Faxon of Yarmouth.

## NANNY

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watches him sleep from a nearby chair. The two bond deeply during the dozen years she lived with Nick's family.

Her letters home comment on the strange behaviors of Americans. "What I will never understand is the need for this substance you put under your arms to stop the smell of sweat. Americans have peculiar delusions of the nose... And the doctor they take me to, why does he insist a decent woman become naked? Shame."

They relate her perspectives on the news, as when she laments over the murder of President Kennedy. "Kennedy's death shocked the country, but it did not shock me," she writes her daughter. "Though you and I have felt many such shadows pass over Greece, I believe America is not yet fully under Lucifer's dominion, though I have come to understand that black people here might disagree with me."

Gradually, her letters turn to speak of their life in a small village after the and German occupation

during the bloody Greek civil war that followed World War II. Fierce resentments raged among factions of villagers, between those who sympathized with the Germans and those who were loyal to Greece. Xanthi's husband, it is revealed, was killed during the turbulence, a murder that she and her daughters witnessed, and a terrible fate befell one of her daughters.

Xantia's moral core, her life experiences, even her outrage indelibly shape Nick. "How can I defend these people?" an adult Nick asks himself about his infamous clients. "Truth is... I do it every day in the teeth of doubt."

"My Xanthi" has the moral heft of a much longer novel. Cotsirilos, who lives in Portland, nimbly weaves many elements, past and present, into the story. She brilliantly juxtaposes the commonplace with the horrors of war and the desire for retribution.

Frank O Smith is a Maine writer whose novel, "Dream Singer," was a finalist for the Bellwether Prize. It was also named a Notable Book of the Year in Literary Fiction by Shelf Unbound. Smith can be reached via his website: www.frankosmithstories.com

## JUSTICE

Continued from Page E1

uary and November 2022, there were 131 femicides in the state of Mexico alone. The authorities are often hostile or indifferent to the victims – dissecting their personal lives to find culpability in their own murders. What was she wearing? Why was she out alone at night? Why did she live by herself? The perpetrators are very rarely brought to justice, and some go on to kill more women.

As Garza points out, the terms "intimate partner violence" and "femicide" did not exist when Liliana was murdered. This type of violence was considered "a crime of passion," as if the brutal killing of a woman were simply a quarrel between lovers. Femicide, the murder of a woman because of her gender, is now a term we hear quite frequently, thanks to the feminists who have been fighting a literal war in the

streets of Mexico and beyond. Women all over the country have been marching to draw attention to the ongoing crisis. Mothers are demanding justice for their slain daughters, which can lead to their own murders. In 2020, protesters took over the Human Rights Commission building in Mexico City and have occupied it ever since. It's become a refuge for women who have been victims of gender-based violence.

Throughout the memoir, Garza endures the excruciating bureaucracy of the Mexican government. She searches for her sister's file and is sent to countless government agencies, each sending her to another office in an endless quest. It's possible that the file may no longer exist. Liliana's killer is still on the run. (Since the publication of the Spanish edition of the book, Garza has been able to track down a few new clues, thanks to readers.)

Garza understands the urgency of justice in a land full of young women like Liliana. Ni Una Más, Not One More, is a chant heard across Mexico and

Latin America. Women won't let up until the violence ends, whenever that may be. We now have more language for violence against women. I suppose that's progress. To be able to name something is powerful. That's when we can begin to dismantle oppressive systems. Language and action, however, are two different things. Language often fails us, leaves us incomplete. That's the nature of language. Not everything can be put into words, especially grief and rage, no matter how precise and skilled the writing is. The beauty of this book is that it reaches for that truth regardless, and in doing so, Liliana becomes indelible. She is so fully realized that by the end, the reader is also mourning. I will be thinking of Liliana for a very long time, perhaps forever.

Erika L. Sánchez is a poet, novelist and essayist whose books include "Lessons on Expulsion," "I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter" and, most recently, "Crying in the Bathroom." She is the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz chair at DePaul University in Chicago.

## BISBEE

Continued from Page E5

fingernails painted neon pink and two strings of colorful beads around his neck. On one side of the room are sculptures, complex and monochromatic. There's a piece on the wall called "Tessellation Phage" that stretches 21 feet wide and 10 feet tall. There are life-size objects made of nails: a bathtub, a stool, a suitcase. On the other side of the room are paintings. They are turquoise, red, neon green, purple. The wall behind them is covered in drips of every color, the remnants of spray paint and splashes.

Bisbee isn't welding anymore, but he is still playing with texture. In his paintings, he has created different effects with a fishing net and pressed leaves – and nails. He put paint on a wood burning he made with nails and pressed it on a canvas, and the swirling pattern is now a painting. He did the same to a sculpture of a sheep, and the resulting painting is part of the ongoing show at Moss Galleries. The twisted shapes in the paintings on his studio wall are



echoes of his previous work.

"It's still the nail," he said. "I'm still always steeped in my own vernacular and history."

Moss chose the most narrative paintings in Bisbee's studio for

the show because she felt they told a story about who he is as an artist and a person. Some are portraits of Bisbee: him among the birch trees under a pink moon, him wearing his colorful

beads, him in a welding mask. Another is a portrait of "St. Emalie," which Moss described as "a love letter."

"There's an overall effect of grandeur and joy and color from

Bisbee sits in his workspace in the Fort Andross Mill among his sculptures made of nails, the only kind of art he made for decades until recently.

Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

a distance, but then when you get right on top of the pieces, they are just as exciting because he has these textures within the forms that have carried through from his prior work with the steel nails," said Moss. "I think it really captures the layers of thought and complexity that he's put into the work."

"For me, it's incredibly special to get to work with somebody with such a great career and to be at the threshold of the new adventure in that career," she added.

Bisbee said he intends to keep discovering where painting can take his art.

"If I ever look back at something and think, that's so much better than what I'm doing now – whoops," he said.

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