

Art review: James Parker Foley celebrates figures in transition

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By Jorge S. Arango September 3, 2023



Installation of Portland artist James Park Foley's show at Sarah Bouchard Gallery in Woolwich. *Photos by Luc Demers/courtesy of Sarah Bouchard Gallery*

Any visit to Sarah Bouchard Gallery in Woolwich is necessarily an experience of suspension between two worlds. The gallery hovers in the tree canopy above a garage, levitating between ground and sky. In this sense, it turns out to be the ideal place to view the magnificent paintings of 30-year-old Portland artist James Parker Foley, whose latest body of work – and first solo show – is up through Sept. 17.

From the second we enter, we can feel an intense interiority and a profound stillness. The paintings (oils on linen and gouaches on paper) are drenched in various luminous shades of blue and glow as if permeated by a soft, warm eternal light. It is clear we are setting off on a journey as we cross the threshold into Foley's universe.

Everywhere figures are breaking through one world into another. They penetrate, emerge from, cleave between or float free above clear lines of demarcation – dividing ocean from sky, one depth from another deeper one, one dimension to others.

And this is the first thing that Foley wants us to understand. In the words of his artist statement: "I wanted to take discomfiting, transitional, in-between space and make it visible. This space only registers –

optically – as space (as opposed to flat color) because of the figures (bodies or dories) passing through it. The horizon is visually defined in relationship to transition, to movement. The border is made not for passing through, but by passing through.”

The boats are vessels of this conveyance, and the figures, all putatively female, are bodies of conveyance. This concept has a very particular and intimate significance for Foley, who is a trans man. But to say these works concern themselves solely with his journey with gender is to diminish, oversimplify and, ultimately, denigrate Foley’s achievement.

Foley’s paintings embody, in an intangible psychic sense as well as a materially physical one, a universal human condition – that of perpetual transition. The nature of reality is incessantly dynamic, and it manifests at the human level of existence as a series of progressions from something into something else. We, every one of us, are constantly transitioning: from past to present to future, from one identity to newer fresher images of ourselves, from one emotion to another, from a condition of seeming stability into one of instability, from knowing to unknowing and back again, from here to there, interior to exterior, from one reality to another.

This is the incontrovertible experience of the self, which Foley sees as moving through various “oceans” of experience. It is an apt metaphor in that water is fluid and constantly shifting, but also in a more expanded sense. The ocean originates all sorts of variable, individuated phenomena, including tidal swells and ebbs, waves, whirlpools, blue holes and so on. Yet all are ephemeral, and none is actually separate from the ocean itself. The implications of this, of course, are cosmic, not to mention humbling.



James Parker Foley, “Below the Dory,” 60” by 52” oil on linen, 2023

To me, the most resolved and moving painting is “Below the Dory.” The boat of the title floats on the horizon line between blue water and black sky under a full moon. Below the surface, a figure descends head-first through a blue channel that feels narrowly bounded and confining. But as she crosses a transversal line into a deeper, blacker depth, she emerges free, arms outstretched and body emanating a radiant bright blue aura.

The inescapable feeling we get is that this figure has shed one world for another and, in so doing, has come resolutely into herself or himself. The figure appears to be female, but not exactly (there are no breasts or genitalia), which is why I referred to Foley’s subjects as “putatively female.” But doesn’t viewing it solely through a trans lens obscure the larger context of the painting? Don’t we all go through this process infinite times throughout our lives? Only the circumstances of these modulations are particular.

A vital requirement for this journey also comes poignantly through in “Below the Dory.” That is the need for the faith and trust that will facilitate transformation. Clearly this figure begins the descent within certain parameters of understanding and trepidation, perhaps even a degree of terror of drowning. Yet what is necessary at that moment is clearly to dive even deeper, because that is where freedom lies. As Foley says in his statement, “This is what it means to go down for air,” which is the title of another exhilarating painting in which a figure dives into the water between two boulders toward a submarine moon.



James Parker Foley, "Getting Carried Away," 60" by 52" oil on linen, 2023

There are paintings of almost unbearable tenderness, as in "Getting Carried Away," where one figure breaches the surface of the water cradling another. I saw this as a demonstration of care, of tending to all our various selves, our soul child and other stages of evolution and development along our journey, not just our present manifestation. Paintings of figures floating in skies above the horizon line ("As Above, So Below" and "Dory Beneath Suspended Woman") seem to represent a kind of apotheosis, where our essential being moves toward or reunites with the larger universe.



James Parker Foley, “Horizon Fault,” 30.75” by 24.5” gouache on paper, 2023

One smaller gouache on paper, “Horizon Fault,” telegraphs a sense of perilousness, where the one we were and the one we are becoming are both susceptible to falling through a fiery chasm – a chasm of waning commitment to the journey, loss of confidence, fear and doubt. The fact that the figures here reach out to each other but do not manage to make contact may also represent fault lines in relationships that must also be released as we move toward freedom.

There is such beauty and rich contemplation here in terms of subject matter. But still another extraordinary aspect of these works is how Foley uses paint to physically concretize this sense of movement from one thing to another. His immersion into the history of color led him to the work of 18th-century chemist Johan Gottlieb Gahn, who was, the statement informs us, “the first to reduce a sample of manganese dioxide to manganese metal.” The inorganic synthetic manganese blue pigment – increasingly rare – was invented in 1907.



James Parker Foley, “Night Swimmer with Wake,” 23” by 26.5” gouache on paper, 2023

YinMn blue (PB 86), discovered by a graduate student at Oregon State University in 2009 (hence its other name, Oregon Blue), was released for production in 2016. Foley’s use of these two tones (and others like Cobalt Chromite, Prussian and Ultramarine), then, represents yet another movement: from a past and now scarce blue to a present-day hue. Additionally, blue pigments in general are notoriously unstable. “Since ancient times blue has struggled with poor lightfastness and toxic components,” Foley writes. But because YinMn was synthesized at 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, it is very stable. Yet another way in which these works physically embody their meaning and the viewer’s resonance with the in-betweenness that suffuses all human experience.

Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland. He can be reached at: jorge@jsarango.com

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