

Review

Arts & Entertainment

At Maine Jewish Museum, viewers are invited on personal journeys

See the works of artists Yvonne Maiden, Arthur Yanoff and Don Peterson in separate shows running into the new year in Portland.

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Yvonne Maiden, "The Wanderer," 2024, acrylic on canvas. Photo courtesy of Maine Jewish Museum

Currently at the Maine Jewish Museum are three shows exemplifying different genres: figurative painting (Yvonne Maiden's "A Paler Shade"), abstract painting (Arthur Yanoff's "The Teaching of Isaac Luria to Reflections on Melville and Other Paintings") and photography paired with abstract painting (Don Peterson's "Echoes of the Other").

What links them, other than their end date of Jan. 3, 2025, is a sense of elusive meaning. Each exhibition is palpably a personal journey, one that we may grasp only in part. Yet lingering in ambiguity, we slowly realize, is a large part of the attraction.

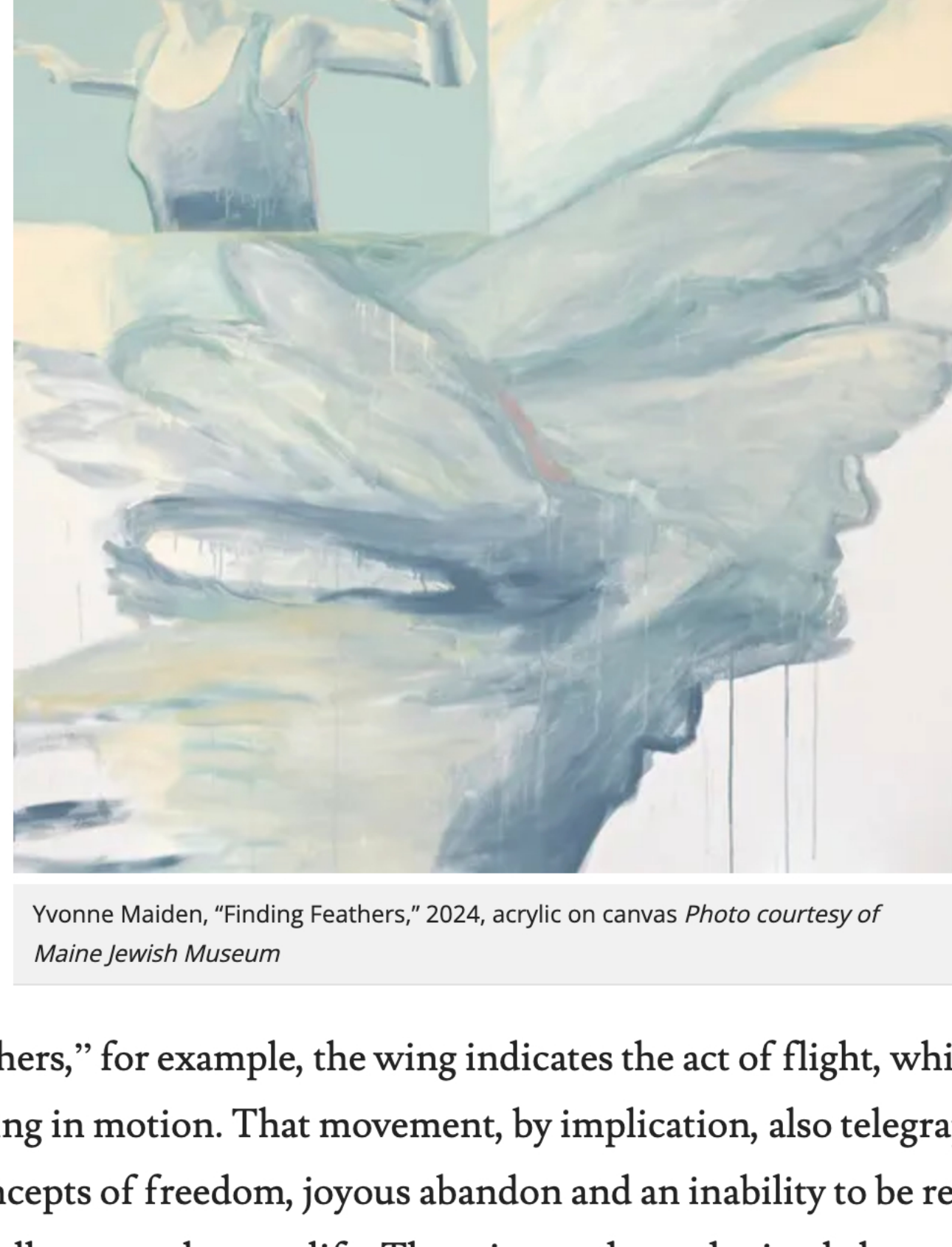
Yvonne Maiden's work seems deceptively simple at first. Her pastel palette is immediately approachable, as is the figuration of her paintings, which, at least initially, seems fully comprehensible. It's clear, for example, that these are portraits of people.

We can also sense she is working from photographs of her subjects and placing them within the picture frame rather than drawing from life, so her methods are not mysterious.

Easy, right? Not so fast. In some of these, Maiden adopts a device favored by David Salle in his 1980s paintings, where the canvas is split – either into a diptych, as in "The Tree," where one half is the image of a woman while the other is an image of a tree trunk – or as an inset portrait that temporarily interrupts the larger composition, as in "Finding Feathers," where a woman in motion occupies the top left corner of a canvas on which Maiden has painted the semi-abstract feathers, which appear, roughly at least, in the form of a wing.

In these, we sense there is a correlation between elements, most obviously through Maiden's overall unifying palette. But at another level, we are asked to divine the relation between these separate parts. It's easy enough to surmise that the relationship has to do with the artist's profound appreciation for nature. But there seems to be more here, both paintings evoking something more viscerally primal.

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Yvonne Maiden, "Finding Feathers," 2024, acrylic on canvas. Photo courtesy of Maine Jewish Museum

In "Finding Feathers," for example, the wing indicates the act of flight, while the portrait also implies a being in motion. That movement, by implication, also telegraphs more fundamental concepts of freedom, joyous abandon and an inability to be restricted by the forces that normally govern human life. There is wonder and miracle here that we perceive beyond the merely visual representation before us.

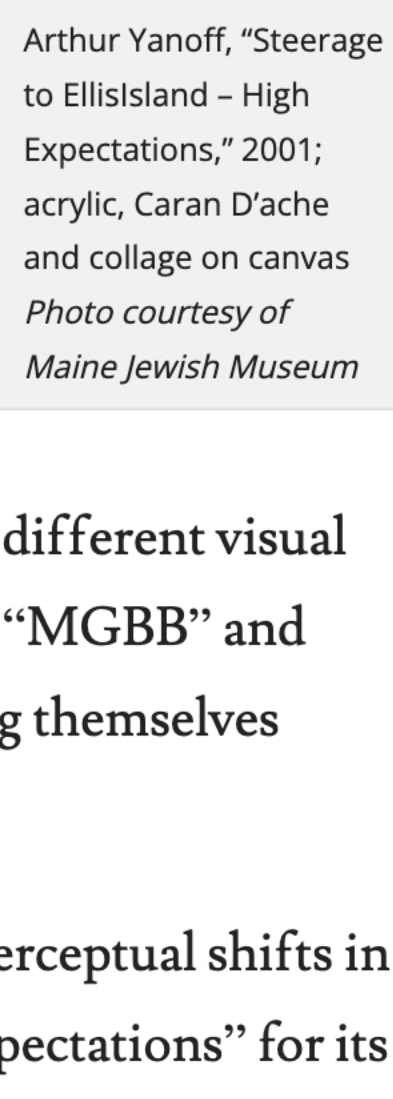
A bird figures prominently in "Bird Wash" too. Here, it sits on the head of a woman whose face and body are invisible from the nose down. What attracts our attention is the surface within the outlines of these joined beings, which feels like an overlay of several washes that are dripping, in contrast to the flatter gray ground of the painting. Maiden describes what is happening as akin to a ritual washing. In the Jewish tradition, tevilah is a full immersion in a mikveh (a bath connected to a natural water source) that is meant to purify the soul.

This ritual washing also happens in "The Wanderer," my favorite work in the show because of the complexity of the young woman's expression in the picture. She seems pensive and unsure, even worried or scared. We can't figure out what is actually going through her mind and her heart, but we know she is in a deep interior state. The wash here feels like a soothing balm that rinses away concerns.

IT'S ABOUT PAINT

Isaac Luria was a 16th-century rabbi and mystic born in Jerusalem who is considered the father of contemporary Kabbalah. How he fits with Melville or the "other paintings" of the title is clear only to Arthur Yanoff. I suspect, though, that the name of the exhibition is merely a reference to the wide-ranging subject matter and painting styles with which Yanoff has experimented over the last four decades (works span from 1981 to 2021).

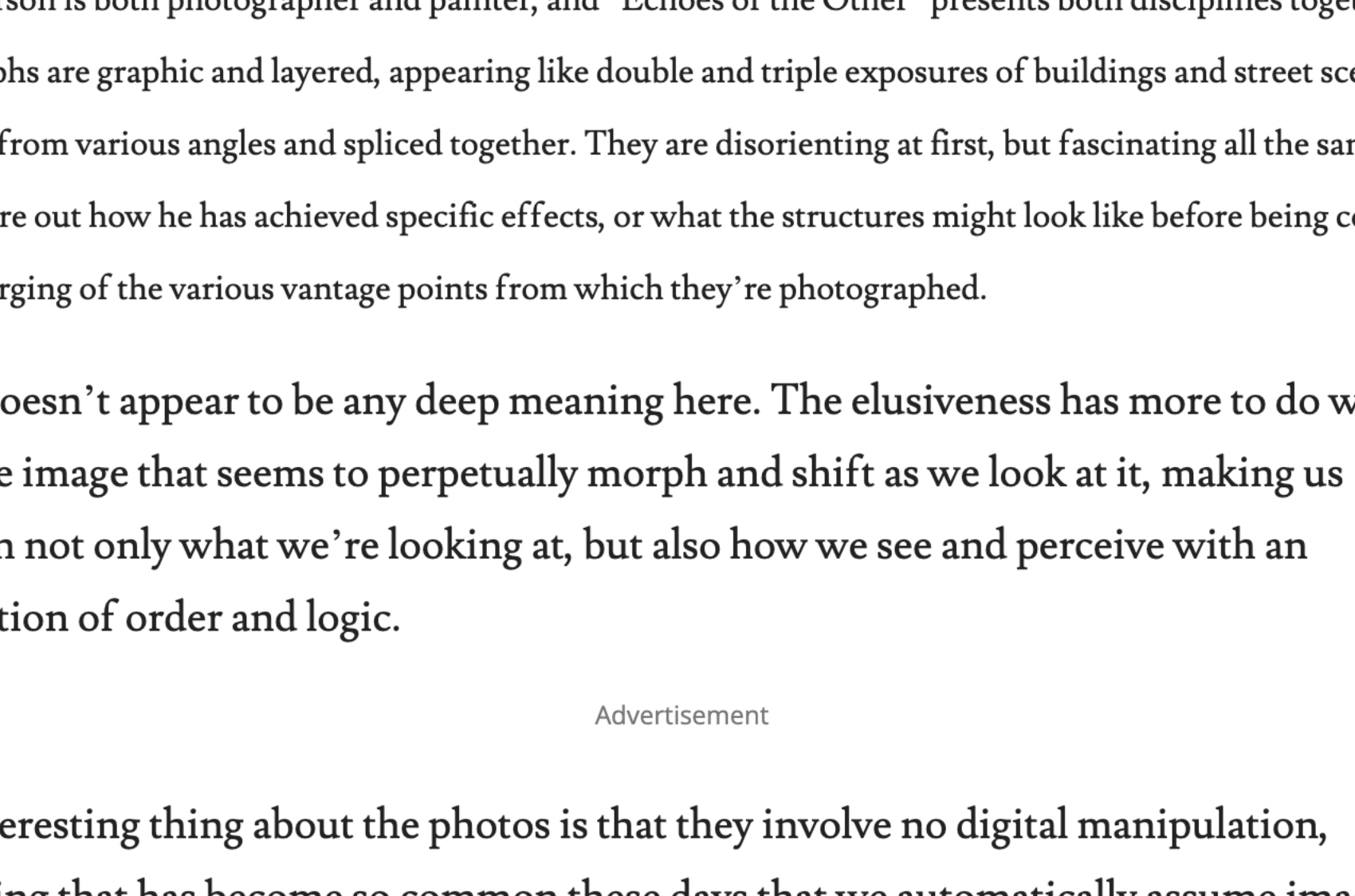
Some paintings are saturated in bold color and executed with thick encrustations of paint. Others incorporate collaged elements. Still others feature liquescent, diluted pigments that bleed into each other like watercolors. They are all abstract, however; though, as his artist's statement reads, "I don't consider a painting realized until I sense an aspect of the original source woven into the fabric." In two paintings titled "Steerage to Ellis Island" (one, from 2001, with the subtitle "High Expectations"; the other subtitled "Speeding Through," from 2002), contain rectangular ship-like forms with paint marks within them that might indicate crowded conditions in the steerage that transported European immigrant Jews to America.



Arthur Yanoff, "Steerage to Ellis Island - High Expectations," 2001; acrylic, Caran d'Ache and collage on canvas. Photo courtesy of Maine Jewish Museum

But all these references are really so oblique and personal that, like Maiden's works, specific meanings become slippery. Zeroing specifically into the quality of painting, however, reveals an artist trying on different visual languages within the genre of abstraction. Some are lovely, but not unique. "MGBB" and "PYGP," both from 1981, for instance, recall Hans Hofmann without setting themselves apart enough to feel like Yanoff's own idiosyncratic style.

Most impressive are works that mix various degrees of viscosity to create perceptual shifts in depth and surface. I'd include both "Steerage" paintings in this – "High Expectations" for its gestural energy (wide brushstrokes, bleeding, splattering) mixed with different levels of transparencies in the color applications; and "Speeding Through" for the modulation of purples (which appear like sea) and pinks (sky). The latter work is a ravishing painting, something we can stare at for hours and feel many sensations simultaneously being communicated through color and its infinitely variegated application. Certain areas plunge us into the deep, others lift us into the ether, and some create the sense of crashing and exploding energies.



Arthur Yanoff, "Steerage to Ellis Island - Speeding Through," 2002; acrylic, chalk and collage on canvas. Photo courtesy of Maine Jewish Museum

"The Teaching of Isaac Luria No. 95" (1990) careens from watered-down colors to thick impasto and from painterly gesture to overlays of washes that imply voids in space. There's a point where we stop trying to figure out what is going on and just immerse ourselves in the thrill of paint and its infinite qualities.

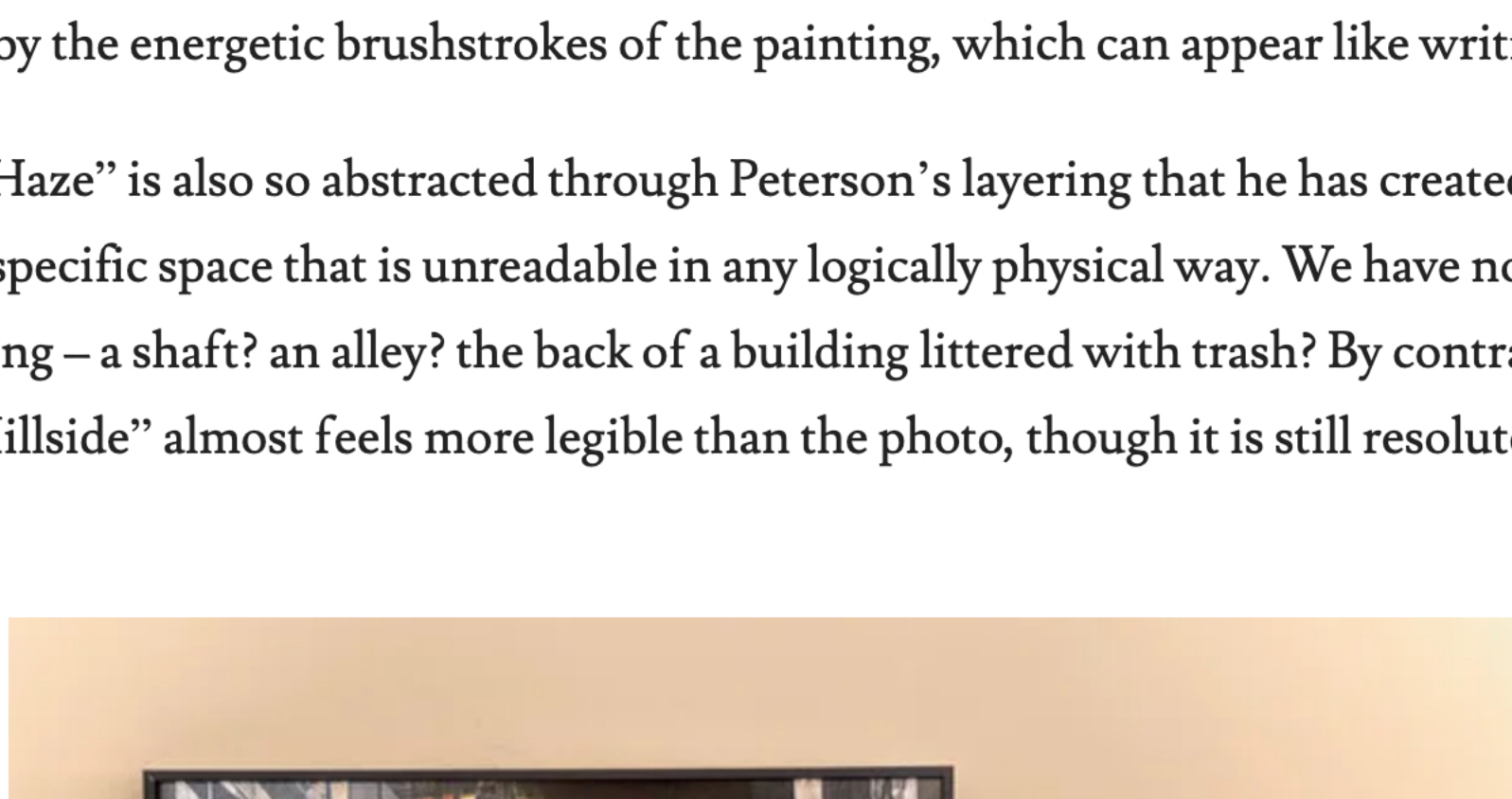
DOUBLE TAKES

Don Peterson is both photographer and painter, and "Echoes of the Other" presents both disciplines together. His photographs are graphic and layered, appearing like double and triple exposures of buildings and street scenes that are taken from various angles and spliced together. They are disorienting at first, but fascinating all the same as we try to figure out how he has achieved specific effects, or what the structures might look like before being confused by the merging of the various vantage points from which they're photographed.

There doesn't appear to be any deep meaning here. The elusiveness has more to do with a concrete image that seems to perpetually morph and shift as we look at it, making us question not only what we're looking at, but also how we see and perceive with an expectation of order and logic.

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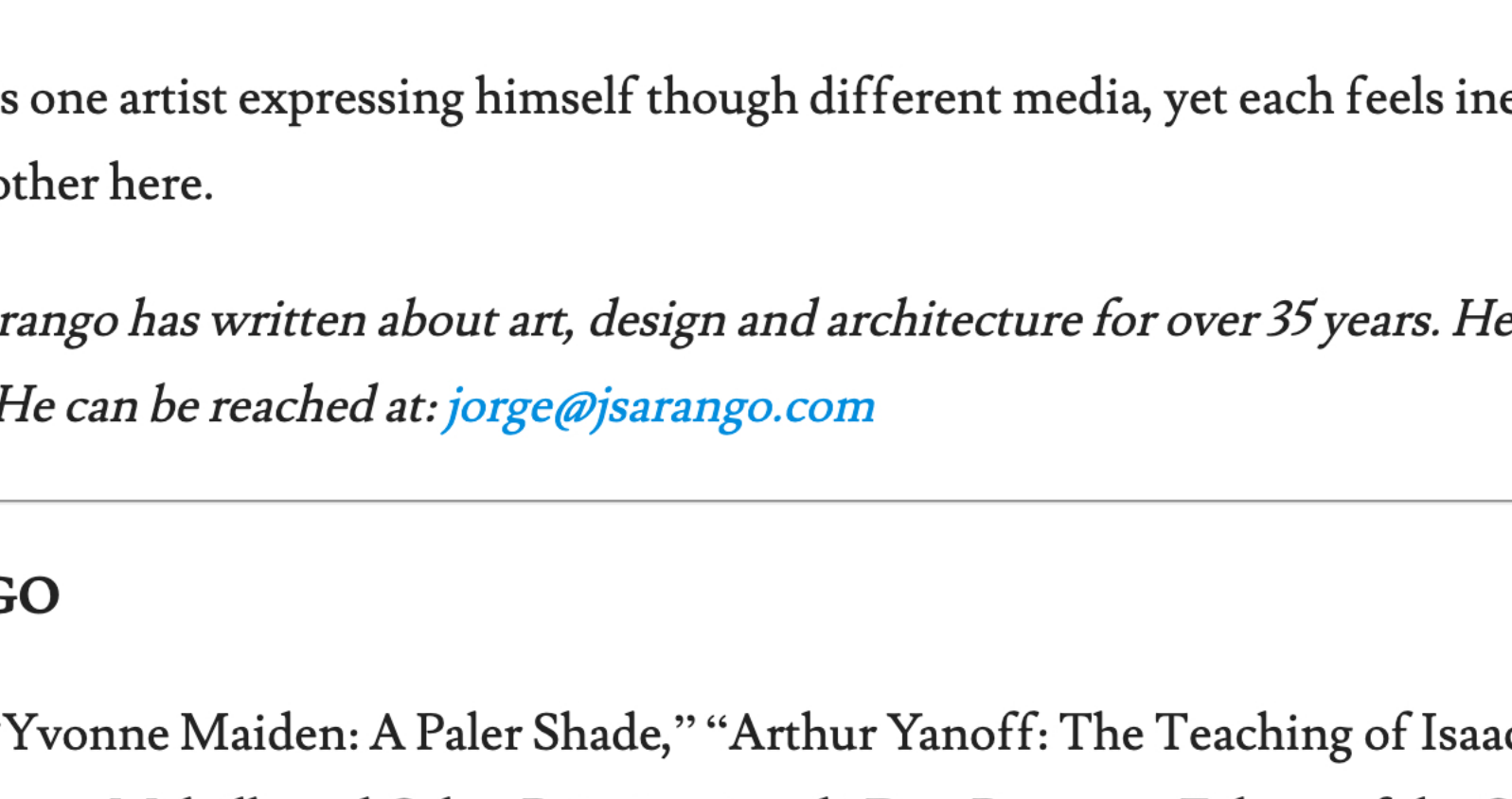
One interesting thing about the photos is that they involve no digital manipulation, something that has become so common these days that we automatically assume images like these are made this way. On the contrary, Peterson builds these images in-camera by utilizing a setting that superimposes each successive image on the previous one(s) and periodically checking the image on the screen until he feels it's done.



Don Peterson, "Graffiti Haze" and, right, "Spring Hillside." Photo courtesy of the artist

The interplay between the photographic and painted images can be intriguing, especially when the abstract paintings feel harmonious with the way Peterson has abstracted the photos accompanying them. Chief among these is the juxtaposition of the photo "Graffiti Haze" and "Spring Hillside," where the calligraphic gestures of the graffiti in the former is mirrored by the energetic brushstrokes of the painting, which can appear like writing.

"Graffiti Haze" is also so abstracted through Peterson's layering that he has created a totally new, nonspecific space that is unreadable in any logically physical way. We have no idea what we're seeing – a shaft? an alley? the back of a building littered with trash? By contrast, "Spring Hillside" almost feels more legible than the photo, though it is still resolutely abstract.



Don Peterson, "After Midnight, Osaka" and, right, "Sketches from (Far) Away." Photo courtesy of the artist

Peterson flips this relationship with the pairing of "After Midnight, Osaka" and two "Sketches from (Far) Away," where the midnight photo is nowhere near as illegible as "Graffiti," transmitting the image of a street, albeit mildly abstracted. The paintings are completely without discernible content yet feel of a piece with the photograph in terms of palette and mood.

Peterson is one artist expressing himself through different media, yet each feels inextricable from the other here.

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

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Yvonne Maiden: A Paler Shade," "Arthur Yanoff: The Teaching of Isaac Luria to Reflections on Melville and Other Paintings" and "Don Peterson: Echoes of the Other"

WHERE: Maine Jewish Museum, 267 Congress St., Portland

WHEN: Through Jan. 3

HOURS: Noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-773-2339, mainejewishmuseum.org

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