

By Keith Powers  
contributing writer

Joan Backes: *Home Construction* and Todd Moore: *Rock Paintings* is on view at the Grimshaw-Gudewicz Art Gallery in the Jackson Arts Center at Bristol Community College through April 5. The exhibitions are free to the public. For information call the gallery at 508-678-2811, extension 2631 or visit [www.bristolcc.edu/gallery](http://www.bristolcc.edu/gallery).

The solidity of nature, and the yearning for safe abode, contrast each other memorably in a joint exhibition currently on view in the Grimshaw-Gudewicz Art Gallery at Bristol Community College. Joan Backes: *Home Construction* and Todd Moore: *Rock Paintings* use entirely different materials and approaches, but the complementary nature of the two exhibitions is palpably present just the same.

Backes, well known in the area as the longtime curator of the Vault series at the New Bedford Art Museum, has created an installation of house frames — perhaps a dozen in all, including three large open buildings that occupy the main floor of the gallery. Tautly constructed, varying in size but only slightly in design, Backes' "homes" are merely the simplest of frames — just enough to keep a structure standing. As with some of the most effective installations, what is not present is as important as what is present. Backes' spaces are crisp, inviting and confidently constructed. But as merely sterile reminders of what "home" really is, they leave the viewer wanting for personal touches — in fact, seeking them out. But no sign of human activity, save the structure itself, exists.

Backes has written eloquently, and previous installations have investigated, the misuse of the natural world. Trees have been a central focus of her work, and the wood constructions here (several are of alternate materials, like aluminum, Plexiglas and bronze) are carefully and lovingly assembled, with great craft.

While the wood materials (poplar, oak, walnut) are of the highest quality, and the joins and symmetries are impeccable, there is a pervasive feeling of sterility, and wanting, in the space. (Aluminum and bronze constructs are equally perfect; one small home, made of recycled materials, stands out anomalously.) A strong feeling of unfulfilled promise lies in these works — not unfulfilled by the artist, but implied by the work.

Moore shows about ten large acrylic-on-canvas paintings, and half a dozen smaller studies of those works on panels. The paintings explore the rock-strewn Rhode Island coast. Although this is clearly the ocean front, the boulders and rip-rap on the coastline are the focus of these paintings. Save for a hint of water, and some sparse vegetation, nothing else makes it way onto the canvases — no birds, no humans or their debris. Just the rocks.

The author notes many aspects of this glacial intertidal zone in his notes: its sense of geological time, with change (large boulders ground down by time and erosion) measured in an extra-human scale. If there is flux, it is beyond our perception.

The paintings are intricately detailed, a prodigious feat given the size and ensemble of the works. Like Backes' installations, but in a much different way, Moore's paintings establish a strong sense of longing, or of an absent narrative.

As humans, we want to tell our story, or at least comprehend a story. The narrative of a place, or its representation, helps us try to understand all that we don't know. Faced with beautifully constructed, but completely empty, homes, and enormous, realistic depictions of a coastline that shows only non-human activity, our striving for narrative and sense-making takes on almost unbearable urgency.

That urgency lies at the appeal of this joint exhibition. Left with only hints of meaning, we want more. Make time to visit this installation, another in a series of sophisticated presentations curated by gallery director Kathleen Hancock.



Joan Backes, *Home Construction* ©2014