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Jordan Seaberry's nod to the WPA is a labor of love

The artist fuses past with present in 'But Mostly We Waited for Spring, When There Could Be Gardens' at Steven Zevitas Gallery

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, Updated September 20, 2022, 3:10 p.m.



Jordan Seaberry, "That Freed Self," 2022. Watercolor, acrylic, graphite, and modeling paste on canvas. STEVEN ZEVITAS GALLERY/JORDAN SEABERRY

In these days of image inundation, it's hard to appreciate the time and labor it takes to make a painting. To the painter, the artwork may represent a relationship more than it does a commodity.

And Jordan Seaberry's watercolor paintings at Steven Zevitas Gallery are all about the work of relationships, and its fruits.

Seaberry is also [co-director of power and possibility](#) at the [US Department of Arts and Culture](#), a grassroots network based in Providence that incites "creativity and social imagination," according to its website. He considers the roles artists play in society, and what a robust federal cultural policy might look like. The compositions of these paintings were inspired by photographs from the Depression-era [Works Progress Administration](#), which put tens of thousands of artists to work.

The surfaces of these pieces are more wall than canvas, a nod to WPA murals.

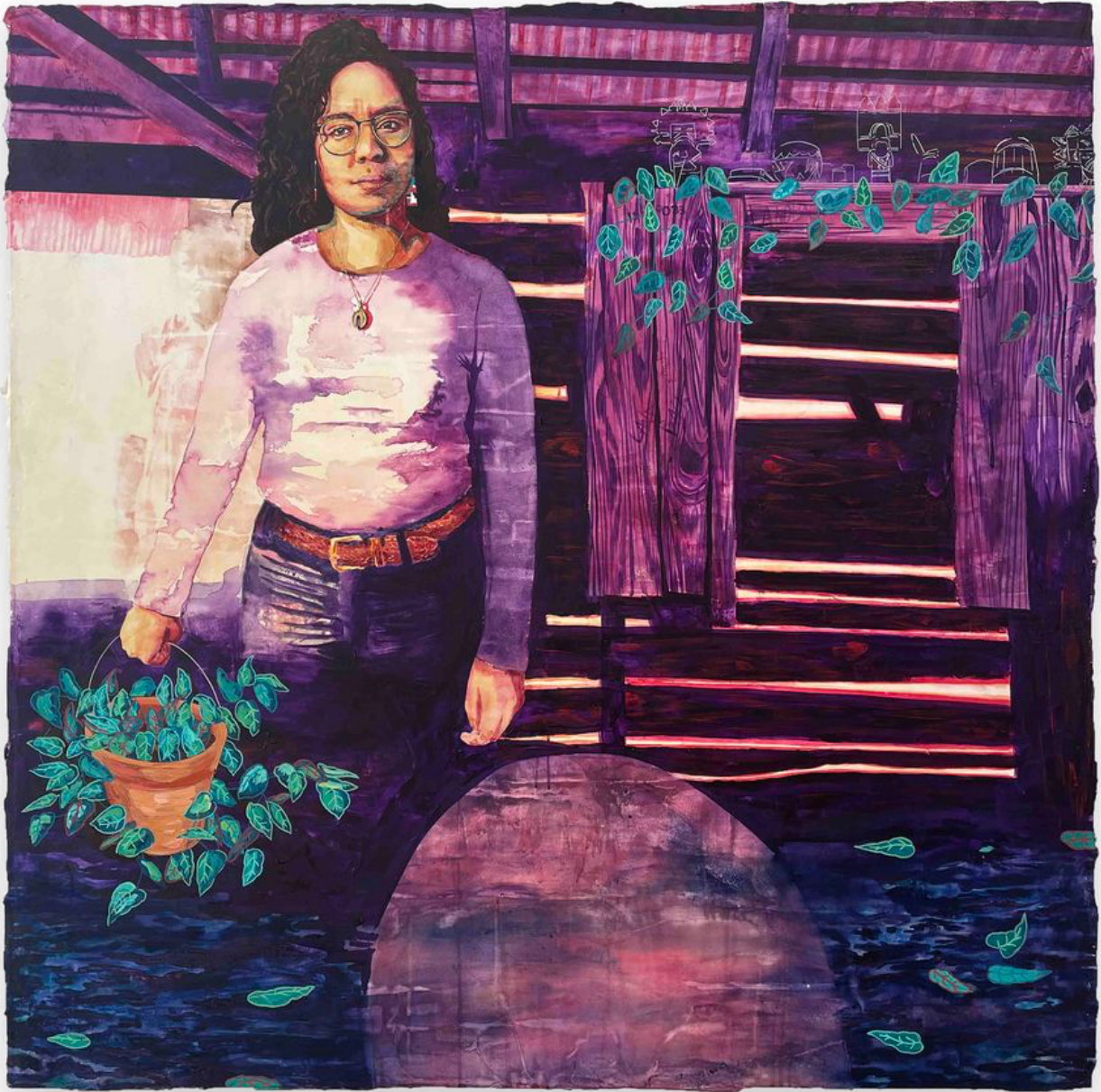


Jordan Seaberry, "The Best of Youth," 2022. Watercolor, acrylic, graphite, and modeling paste on canvas. STEVEN ZEVITAS GALLERY/JORDAN SEABERRY

Seaberry builds them from modeling paste and gesso, and sands them down to absorb his tricky medium.

He paints a timeless place sodden with color, and into that place, in the posture of people from WPA photographs, he paints people close to him. Each work depicts “a person who has built, supported, loved me: an act of labor also often ignored,” he writes in an [artist’s statement](#). The subjects in his source photographs also had personal connections; invoking his own, Seaberry retraces bonds of love.

“That Freed Self” features Seaberry’s friend painter [Alex Jackson](#) squatting amid purple puddles, heart-shaped leaves, and tiny white crosses. Is he in a cultivated field or a graveyard? Another man tugs at sturdy green root system, suggesting that, either way, growth persists. Jackson’s brow furrows, as if we’ve come upon him trying to solve a problem. He gazes at the viewer, drawing us into relationship.



Jordan Seaberry, "She Gather Them and Give Them Back to Me," 2022. Watercolor, acrylic, graphite, and modeling paste on canvas. STEVEN ZEVITAS GALLERY/JORDAN SEABERRY

The palette is bruised and tender in “She Gather Them and Give Them Back to Me.” Seaberry’s wife, Zalyndria Crosby, stands holding a pot of ivy in a wood shack. Shadow and light make a kind of delirium. Sun shines through the slats. An otherworldly orb of pale purple hovers at the bottom.

Time isn’t linear in Seaberry’s elegant paintings, but an endless twine looping back and pulling forward. People may come and go, but love and work continue, and sustain us.

JORDAN SEABERRY: But Mostly We Waited for Spring, When There Could Be Gardens

At Steven Zevitas Gallery, 450 Harrison Ave., through Oct. 22. 617-778-5265, www.stevenzevitasgallery.com