

## Uniting Inside and Out



An installation view of the paintings of Robert Harms, which can be seen at Madoo through this weekend.

Gary J. Mamay

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With all of the possible artists Madoo could exhibit in its gallery space, it is always a treat to see how the shows the conservancy chooses to mount suit not only the room but the surrounding landscape.

In the case of Robert Harms, whose recent paintings are on view through Sunday, they have caught lightning in a bottle.

Madoo's gallery has the benefit of being born from an artist's studio. After Robert Dash bought the Sagaponack property and then moved in, he renovated the space in 1967 into a place he could paint. As a result, its light, the height of the walls, and its expanses of white set off by exposed beams create a simple, rustic, yet sophisticated place to display art. The significant windows onto the property, including its pond, add further depth and animation to whatever is placed there.

Mr. Harms, who lives and works on Little Fresh Pond in North Sea, looks out his own windows into our habitat. Placing his work in Dash's studio is a transformative act, all the more striking because it is such a subtle shift from one area artist's studio to another.

Like Dash, Mr. Harms incorporates nature into his paintings, which don't seem as abstract once you experience his environs. Just as one of the best places to view his work is in his studio, mere feet from the pond, Madoo also brings out its profound connections to the South Fork, its landscape, and its light.

Those familiar with his more recent work will note that the containers of extensive white borders and the backgrounds peeking through the compositions that have marked his more recent work are largely absent. The peaks of white primed canvas, while still in evidence, are no longer so prevalent, as the compositions have taken on a greater density, without giving up the skeletal linear rhythms that tie them to his previous style. That is not to say that they are back to the early crowded constructions inspired by his years working with Joan Mitchell, but there is a heaviness and intensity to these compositions that have overtaken the more ethereal treatments of the pre-Covid era.

At the same time, there are pure appreciations of visual pleasures, such as a summery rendering of "Sunflowers" from 2021. The deconstructed blooms become a hallucinatory explosion of their parts: green stems, brown centers, and riotous yellow petals. Rather than any literal translation of the form, these sunflowers are pure personal idiom, a fever dream.

A much smaller painting, "Snowfall," serves as counterbalance in its near absence of color (although a few hints of green, blue, and brown are scattered throughout, as is characteristic for the painter). The composition makes a similar frontal assault as it does in the other canvas but feels more oppressive in its moodiness.

By the same token, a painting like "Almost Spring," from this year, seems like a precious gift. There is joy and lightness in the balletic lines made from pastel shadings of color. The choice of a blue background on the upper third of the canvas implies a skyline and horizon from which light greens and yellows, the first real colors of spring, leap about. It offers one of the few times there might be a way into one of his paintings.

There are a mere seven works in this show, but together they form a powerful statement about the landscape here, the mind of an artist, and the ways the two continually combine to create something more formidable than a mere appreciation of natural beauty.

The atmosphere Mr. Harms creates within these meditations seems to permeate the room and float outside to Madoo's own pond and dancing green gardens, uniting indoors to outdoors in the same way he does in his own studio.