

JOSEPH ABLOW: *A Retrospective*

Amherst College – Eli Marsh Gallery
in conjunction with Pucker Gallery, Boston

Thoughts on the Still Lives of Joseph Ablow

By Hellmut Wohl, Professor Emeritus of Art history Boston University



Watercolor, 1960's, Watercolor, 9 x 12"

I

Still life implies special powers of perception. Asked to describe a table, a glass, a pitcher, or a cup, we tend to describe the object itself rather than the relationship of its form, surface and texture to the space it occupies, or to the light that renders it visible. We are looking at the object rather than seeing it. Seeing implies an awareness of the visual context of space and light in which the object exists. Looking and seeing are not the same thing. In Bertolt Brecht's play *Life of Galileo*, Andrea, the son of Galileo's housekeeper, protests that he sees that the sun in the evening is not where it was in the morning and that it can therefore not stand still; to which Galileo replies, "What do you see? You see nothing. You only look. Looking is not seeing."

II

Still life emerged as a subject in its own right in Flanders and Holland in the sixteenth century. It flourished in France, and in the eighteenth century Chardin endowed it with a totally new grace and humanity, even though it continued to rank as the lowest order of painting. Toward the end of the nineteenth century Cézanne raised still life to a status it had never before enjoyed and it was through Cézanne that in the early years of the last century in France still life came to be recognized as the prime vehicle for formal innovation and experiment.

The advantages of still life painting are that it allows the artist to work from nature and still have the same control over his composition as the artist who works directly from imagination. For the still life painter it is normal to compose a picture in terms of a pre-pictorial arrangement of the objects to be represented. In this way the subject of the painting already begins to belong to the realm of art before it has been painted. What remains for the painter is to discover the real subject embedded within this assemblage.

Throughout Joseph Ablow's career still life has been a constant, but over the years his response to the objects assembled in front of him has changed remarkably. In Brecht's terms his has been a life devoted to looking in order to see. *

III

Several years ago a friend in London showed me two large abstract paintings on which he had been working for a year or so. "They are all about space, color and light," he said. It is arguable that space, color and light are what all painting, whether abstract or representational, is about. In 1435 Leon Battista Alberti in *Della Pittura* wrote:

As painting aims to represent things seen, let us note how in fact things are seen. In the first place, when we look at a thing, we see it as an object which occupies space. Then, as we look, we observe the colors of surfaces; the representation in painting of this aspect, since it receives all its variations from light, will aptly here be termed the reception of light.

Alberti's space is the space of linear perspective, a definition that was unchallenged until Maurice Denis reminded painters in 1890 that "a picture – before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote – is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order." Denis's point was that the illusionistic space created by linear perspective denies the fact that a painting is a flat surface, and that without recourse to linear perspective, space and light can be created on the flat surface by "colors assembled in a certain order."

It is fair to say that through much of his career Ablow has been concerned with reconciling the demands of describing space, form and light with those made by the picture surface. Whether in the Fauve influenced immediacy of his earliest still life works, the more planar paintings that began with his Amherst Series of studio interiors, or the severe and monumentally structured tables done in the 90's, this fundamental pictorial problem remains a continuing question in search of resolution.

The very ordinary and unprepossessing cups, boxes and bowls that serve as Ablow's cast of characters are typically deployed in patterns that affirm the painting surface. In canvases such as *Large Still Life Frieze* (1986) or the *Still Life on Yellow Drape* (1974)

FRONT COVER:

Dark Stripes, 1983, Pastel/Gouache, 19 x 31", JA93

Design: Joseph Ablow, Jennifer Bennett
Editor: Jeanne Gressler, David Winkler
Photography: Max Coniglio

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they are brought close to the picture plane and simply lined up along the front edge of the table. At other times their shapes are emphasized by being set against insistently decorative drapery. The most forceful of these are a series of works from the early 1990's built out of the unrelenting rhythm of stripes.

The portrayal of space is achieved in Ablow's work with various modes of perspective. In the large *Congregation* (1990-94) for example, he has used both linear and reverse perspective while in *Studio Table I: Amherst* he has experimented with a selective use of curvilinear space. Often, tables (with or without objects on them) are seen from a certain distance aligned with the picture's vertical and horizontal axes as in *Duo* and *Studio Table III: Amherst Series*. At other times the tables are brought close to the viewer, tipped up, hovering between spatial recession and affirmation of the picture plane – between reality and the abstraction of art.

One of the earliest of these, *The Round Table of 1968*, may be usefully compared with *Vigil* of 1993 painted twenty-five years later. In the earlier painting forms are defined as solids by means of a facture that emphasizes the marks of the painter's hand and the act of painting. The facture of *Vigil* is virtually invisible. Objects exist not so much as material things but as forms projected on the surface of the painting by light, as if on a screen. Both pictures are subtle instruments telling us to redraw our notion of what an object is so as to see it in a more distinctive, suggestive way; turning it, as in Ariel's song, "into something rich and strange."

IV

Objects in these canvases and works on paper – *Congregation*, *Portal* (1994), *Studio Dialogue* (2000) – are modulators of space, light and shadows that in the words of Stanley Cavell, imply "a light from outside the frame, but at the same time give the impression that certain things are lit from within." In some canvases the spectral, dimly glowing, shadowed world of the table top with its regular, geometric form of a cup or a cube, is animated by drapery – *Shadows* (1992), *Shawl I* and *Shawl II* (1993). Ablow has said that he uses drapery "as was the practice of painters in earlier times...to offer commentary on the action." *Noah's Bowl*, for example, is a paraphrase of Bellini's *The Drunkenness of Noah* within the terms of still life.

In the elegiac *Monument* (1990) the table is covered by drapery rising steeply at the left and cascading to the right in fluted folds, like the pleats in the garment of a Greek Archaic Kore surrounding a tomb-like opening in the table's side. In *Leviathan* (1989-90) the table top merges with the drapery, transforming the still life into a thing disturbingly alive. In 1858 Théodore Thoré in *Les musées de la Hollande* protested against the use of "nature morte" as the French term for still life on the grounds that seventeenth century Dutch still life paintings do not look at all dead. In a similar vein, Ablow has written:

Because the (still life) objects are inanimate, it does not mean that they are still, and because the objects have been arranged by the artist it does not ensure his control over the world they become...a world that is as stable as the imagination that attempts to control it, that can be, for all its insistent reticence, disquieting and provocative.

V

In the last decade, Ablow has begun to provide titles for his work such as *Threnody*, *Monument*, *Portal*, *Noah's Bowl*, or *Vigil* that point to autobiographical associations. They are for him, "mementos of someone I have known," or "about loss" and are indices of the emotional involvement one senses in recent years where personal narrative and still life intersect. The playful spirit of Ablow's early painting has yielded to an atmosphere more reserved and formal; at the same time it has grown more expressive and expansive. Within the self-imposed limitations of still life, especially a still life that insists on considering only the most ordinary subjects possessed of neither charm nor meaning, Ablow has achieved an art capable of imbuing them with an affecting significance.



Still Life, 1970, Pastel, 8 x 10". JA2

The Round Table, 1968, Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 38"





The Square Table, 1968, Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 48"

Still Life in Shadow, 1973, Oil on canvas, 50 x 40", JA20



White Table w/ Indian Rug, 1974, Acrylic, 48 x 42", JA12





Floral Drape, 1970, Pastel, 18 x 14"

Still Life on Yellow Drape, 1974, Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 40"





Studio Table III, Amherst Series, 1976, Oil on canvas, 28 x 40", JA27



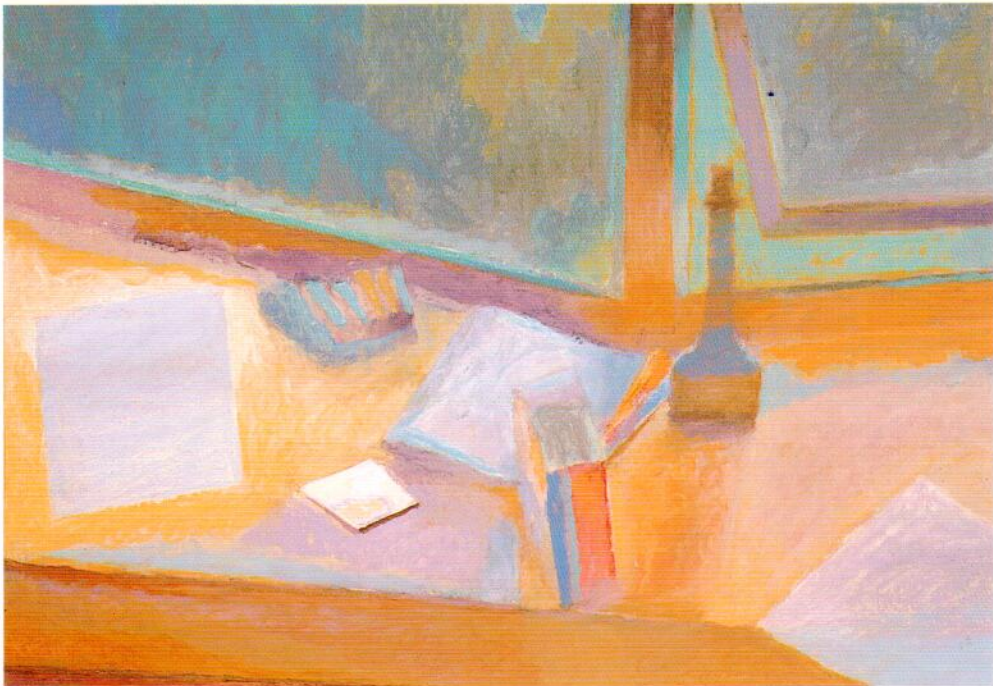
Studio Table I - Amherst, Oil on canvas, 30 x 44", JA5



Table, Book & Boxes, 1979-80, Oil on canvas, 52 x 36", J.A.21



Studio Window, 1981, Pastel, 19 3/4 x 31 1/4", JA54



Still Life, Pastel, 18 3/4 x 27", JA64



The Yellow Drape, 1989, Pastel, 23 x 19", JA97



Still Life with Kilim, 1985, Pastel/Gouache, 29 x 40", JA88



The Blue Stripe, 1983, Pastel/Gouache, 21 x 26 1/2", JA105



The Large Kilim, Pastel/Gouache, 39 x 35". JA103



Still Life Landscape, 1985, Oil on paper, 22 x 30". JA184



Large Still Life Frieze, 1986, Oil on canvas, 32 x 66", JA109



Leviathan, 1989-90, Oil on canvas, 46 x 62", JA132



Noah's Bowl, 1990-91, Oil on canvas, 36 x 52", JA128



Monument, 1990-91, Oil on canvas, 46 x 62", JA125



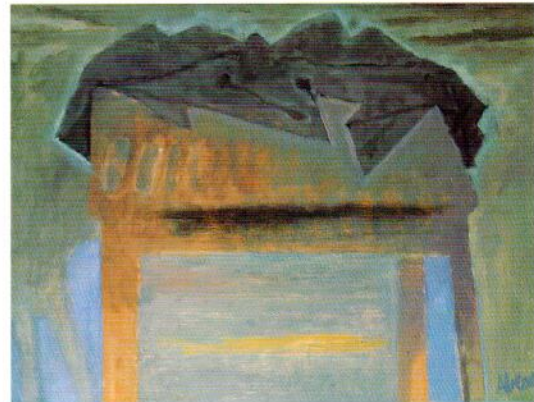
Reef, 1990, Oil on canvas, 38 x 50", JA144



Portal, 1994, Oil on canvas, 30 1/2 x 48", JA146



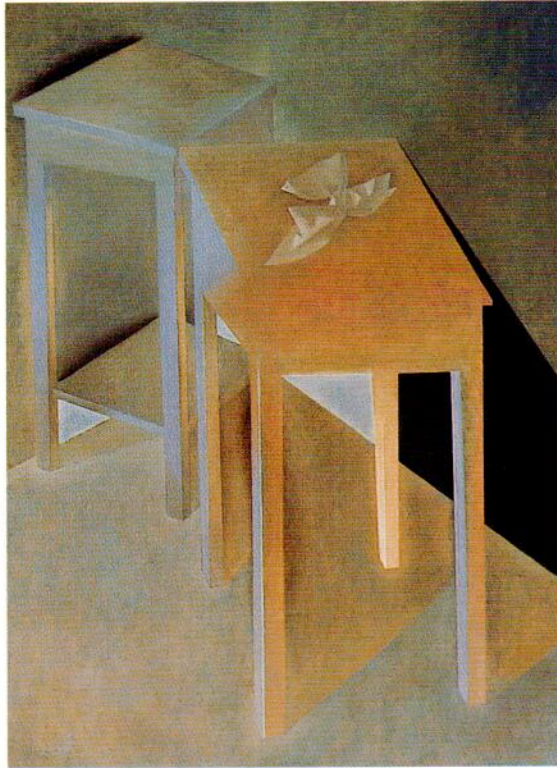
Mackinnon's Wrench (sm. version), 1988, Oil on canvas, 16 x 20", JA133



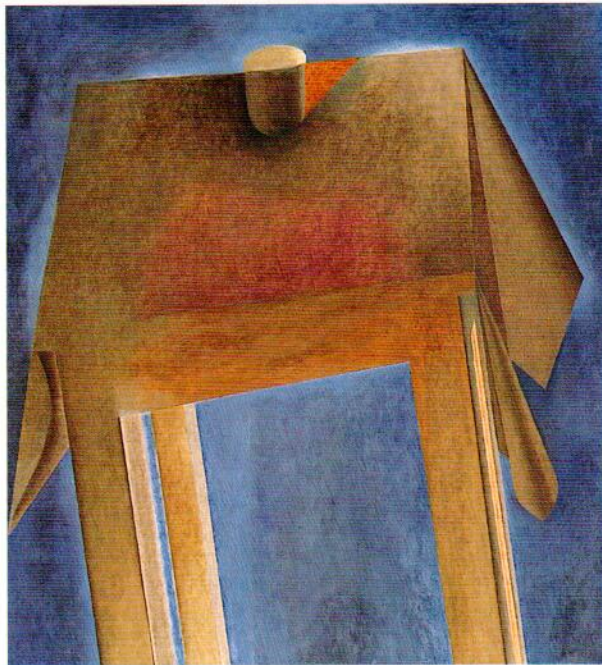
Threnody - small version, Oil on canvas, 12 x 16", JA138



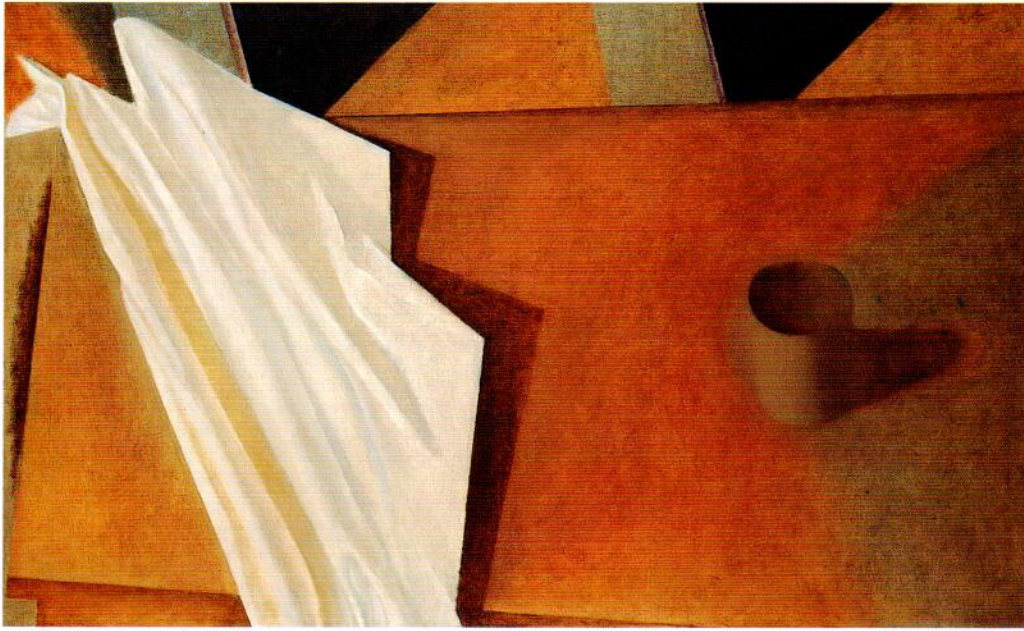
Congregation, 1990-94, Oil on canvas, 50 x 70", JA150



Duo, 1993. Oil on canvas, 50 x 36", JA157



Vigil, 1993. Oil on canvas, 48 x 44", JA149



Shadows, 1992-93, Oil on canvas, 22 x 36", JAI 156



Mantle, 2000, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30", JAI 174



Three Shadows, 2000, Oil on canvas, 28 x 42 1/4", JA170



Studio Dialogue, 2000, Oil on canvas, 24 1/2 x 48 1/4", JA185

JOSEPH ABLOW

BORN: 1928 Salem, Massachusetts

EDUCATION:

1955 M.A., Harvard University, (Art History)
 1954 B.A., Bennington University, (Art and History)
 1951 Diploma with Highest Honors for five years of study in Painting,
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
 1952/53 Undergraduate study at Brandeis University
 1950/51 Tufts College
 1946/47 St. John's College
 Advanced study in painting with Oskar Kokoschka, Ben Shahn, Karl Zerbe,
 and in Design with Gyorgy Kepes



Quintet, 2002, w/c & Gouache
 9 3/4 x 19 1/4", JA199



Sextet, 2000, w/c & Gouache
 9 1/2 x 11 3/4", JA176



Rosy Fingered Dawn, 2002, w/c & Gouache
 5 1/4 x 12 1/2", JA198



The Light Shadow, 2002, w/c & Gouache
 12 3/4 x 12 1/2", JA197

ACADEMIC POSITIONS:

Visiting Artist, Amherst College, Fall 2003
 Professor Emeritus, Boston University, 1996
 Professor of Art, Boston University, 1972-1995
 Visiting Professor, Amherst College, spring 1982 and 1975-1976
 Boston University Summer Program, Lugano, Switzerland, 1975
 Member of the Cambridge Humanities Seminar and Visiting Scholar, MIT, 1973-1982
 Associate Professor of Art, Boston University, 1963-1975
 Chairman, Division of Art, Boston University, 1964-1967
 Visiting Associate Professor, MIT Department of Humanities, 1969-1970
 Assistant Professor, Wellesley College, 1962-1963
 Assistant Professor, Bard College, 1959-1961
 Instructor, Middlebury College, 1955-1958
 Contributing Editor, *Bostonia Magazine*, 1986-1989

SOLO EXHIBITIONS:

2003 Amherst College, Amherst, MA
 2001, 1994 Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA
 1995 Miami University, Oxford, OH
 1991, 1987, 1983, 1981, 1979
 Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston, MA
 1987 Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA
 1983 Trustman Art Gallery, Simmons College, Boston, MA
 1982, 1976 Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, MA
 1982 Rachel W. Davis Gallery, Houston, TX
 1980 Swansborough Galleries, Wellfleet, MA
 1972, 1961 Bard College, New York, NY
 1971 Princeton Gallery, Princeton, NJ
 1969, 1966, 1961
 Boris Mirsky Gallery, Boston, MA
 1968 Middlebury College, Middlebury VT

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (partial list):

1999 "Boston-Paris 1949", Boston Public Library, Boston, MA
 1983 Mitchell Museum, Mt. Vernon, IL
 1981, 1964 DeCordova & Dana Museum, Lincoln, MA
 1977 American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, NY
 1946-1976 A Selection of American Art: The Skowhegan School
 1976 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA
 1976 Colby College, Waterville, ME
 1969 Kunstsalon Wolfsberg, Zurich
 1962, 1963 Simmons College, Boston, MA
 1957 62nd American Exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
 1954 Young Americans, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
 1962, 1961, 1958, 1956, 1953, 1952
 Boston Arts Festival, Boston, MA

AWARDS:

- 1987 Silver Medal Award, Best Article of the Year, Council for Advancement and Support of Education
1982 Boston University Research Grant
1961 First Prize, Rhode Island Art Festival
1958-59 Fulbright Grant in Painting, Paris
1953 Purchase Prize, Skowhegan School of Painting
1951 Paige Traveling Fellowship, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

LECTURES (partial listing):

- Miami University, Oxford, OH, 1995
Salve Regina College, Newport, RI, 1990
Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA, 1987
Saint John's University, Collegeville, MN, 1986
The Ten o'clock News, Channel 2, WGBH Boston, MA, Aug. 22 & 29, 1986
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, 1984
Nieman Foundation, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1982, 1983
Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, 1980
University of New Hampshire, 1980 and 1982
Fine Arts Center, Provincetown, MA, 1977
Amherst College, Amherst, MA, 1975, 1978, 1982
Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, PA, 1975
Portland Art Museum, Portland, ME, 1972

PUBLICATIONS:

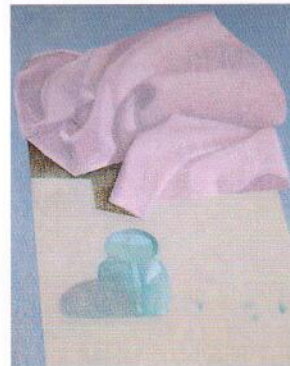
Bostonia Magazine Articles:

- "Oscar Kokoschka's World Viewed," June/July 1987
"The Musée d'Orsay: Resurrecting the Salons," April 1987
"Inter Stella Space," February/March 1987
"Je Suis le Mystère," December/January 1987
"Bostonians: Elegant and Otherwise," October 1986
"Metamorphosis of an Artist: Philip Guston and the Nature of Identity," Vol. 60, no. 2 April/May 1986
"New Beginning: The Last Paintings of Philip Guston" an introductory essay for the exhibition, Philip Guston: The Late Works, arranged by the International Cultural Corporation of Australia for the National Gallery of Victoria. The Art Gallery of Western Australia and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1984.
"Two Cheers for Realism," New Boston Review, September 1978
"Gombrich's Art and/or Illusion," Boston University Review, September 1978
"Gombrich's Art and/or Illusion," Boston University Journal, Vol. XXV, No. 3, 1978
"Boston Expressionism," New Boston Review, February/March 1979
"Hyman Bloom and the Uses of the Past," New Boston Review, Spring, 1976
"The Art of David Aronson," an introductory essay for the retrospective exhibition, Brandeis University and the Jewish Museum, 1979 Introduction to catalogue for the exhibition, Oskar Kokoschka's Schuler und Freunde, Zurich, 1969

In preparation: Pictorial Practices: Ways and Meanings of Paintings

COLLECTIONS:

- Bard College, Annandale-on-the-Hudson, NY
Beth Israel Hospital, Boston, MA
DeCordova and Dana Museum, Lincoln, MA
Mead Art Gallery, Amherst College, Amherst, MA
Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT
Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME
University of Massachusetts, Harbor Campus, MA
Wiggin Collection, Boston Public Library, Boston, MA



Shawl, 1993, Oil on canvas
22 x 18", JA152



Shawl II, 1993, Oil on canvas
26 x 18", JA153

JOSEPH ABLOW: *A Retrospective*



Still Life with Paul Klee, 2000, w/c & Gouache, 9 1/2 x 10 1/2", JA182

Exhibition Location: AMHERST COLLEGE
Eli Marsh Gallery – Fayerweather Hall
Amherst Massachusetts
413-542-2365
www.amherst.edu/about_amh/visit/drive.html

Gallery Hours: 9 AM to 4 PM Monday through Friday
1 to 4 PM Saturday and Sunday

Exhibition Dates: 2 October 2003 – 2 November 2003

Lecture by the artist: Thursday 2 October 2003 at 4:30PM
Pruyne Lecture Hall, Room 115 Fayerweather
Reception to immediately follow Lecture
The public is invited to attend
The artist will be present

In conjunction with: PUCKER GALLERY

Gallery Hours: Monday through Saturday 10:00 am to 5:30 pm;
Sundays 1:00 to 5:00 pm.

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Parking: One hour free validated parking is available
on the corner of Newbury and Dartmouth Streets

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