



Bernard Langlais: Live and Let Live

April 4–October 3, 2021

In 1940, a nineteen-year-old Bernard Langlais (1921–1977) left the logging and canoe-manufacturing community in Old Town, Maine, where he was born, set on pursuing a career in commercial art. His childhood studio—in a loft over his grandparents’ barn—was filled with his early artistic exploits: comic strips, painted banners for local sports games, and cartoon drawings. Referring to this rustic, art-filled space, his wife, Helen, would later say, “In a way, he spent the rest of his life re-creating it.”



**John Michael
Kohler Arts Center**

Curated by Hannah W. Blunt, former Langlais Curator of Special Projects at the Colby College Museum of Art, *Bernard Langlais: Live and Let Live* is the first of two exhibitions at the Arts Center exploring Bernard Langlais’s life and art.

Live and Let Live



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Eager as Bernard Langlais was for artistic exposure, and to simply “go somewhere else,” the seeds of a return to his Maine roots were sown within just a few years. In 1949, after serving in the Naval Air Transport Service and studying commercial art in Washington, D.C., he received a scholarship to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, a new school set on a 160-acre farm in central Maine. In its converted-barn studios and open-air “classrooms,” Langlais was enlightened by paradox: he was surrounded by a diverse group of experimental artists, just sixty miles down back roads from his childhood home. He abandoned commercial design for fine art, and began painting vibrant, expressionistic landscapes.

Painting occupied Langlais throughout the 1950s, although he never settled on a single style. Living in New York’s Chelsea neighborhood and exhibiting his work to some success, he moved restlessly from naturalism toward abstraction, from traditional landscapes and still lifes to experiments inspired by the avant-garde. An interest in the work of Norwegian artist Edvard Munch prompted a year of study in Oslo on a Fulbright Scholarship. Deeply absorbed by the majestic pine trees and dramatic seasonal aspects of the Scandinavian landscape, Langlais grew nostalgic for the northern climate. He was particularly fascinated by old wooden buildings in Norway, which reminded him of the architecture of home. He married a fellow Mainer named Helen Friend in Oslo in 1955. The couple began spending summers at a rustic riverside cottage in Cushing, Maine.

In 1956, while building a wall in this cottage, Langlais found himself captivated by working with leftover scraps of wood. This resourceful home-carpentry project soon prompted an entirely new and deeply satisfying approach to image making. Langlais’s “wood paintings”—abstract, mosaic-like compositions assembled using odd pieces of wood—immediately caught the attention of the New York art world. He was included in the watershed exhibitions *New Forms, New Media* at the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1960 and *The Art of Assemblage* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961, and in a solo exhibition at the prestigious Leo Castelli Gallery.

Despite this initial success, Langlais became disillusioned by New York’s gallery culture. He started to explore figurative subjects—in particular, the animal life of coastal Maine. Many from the audience that revered Langlais’s first wood paintings balked at this shift, calling the work “too primitive” and “craftsman-like.” The pressures of being in the limelight, and of having the most fulfilling work of his career publicly scrutinized, took its toll. In 1966, he purchased a farmhouse across the road from his cottage in Cushing and returned permanently to Maine. The move presented several practical opportunities for Langlais—to work on a larger scale and to have easier access to wood, the material that most energized his creativity. “Everything seemed to change for the better when we moved back to Maine,” he said. Almost immediately, Langlais made a monumental gesture about his sense of place, building a thirteen-foot-tall wooden horse on the rocky frontage of his land: a literal “gift horse” for his rural locality.



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Langlais lived for only ten more years, but he produced a full life’s work in that time—art in vast quantities and of immense proportions. He treated his land as his canvas, constructing dozens of larger-than-life wood sculptures and placing them in whimsical arrangements amid trees, in ponds, on barn walls, and in the company of his small menagerie of farm pets. Defying the static and sterile gallery space with a dynamic outdoor exhibition, he welcomed Maine weather and wildlife as equal contributors to his creative process. Langlais declared, “I don’t know if I’m called a constructivist, sculptor, or painter...But I wouldn’t mind being called a backwoodsman.”

At the time of his death in 1977, Langlais’s outdoor art environment comprised well over one hundred pieces, including more than sixty-five monumental sculptures. These works functioned in direct dialogue with Langlais’s domestic space and daily experiences: a gruesome sculpture of a gutted deer at the edge of the woods was meant to deter trespassing hunters; a pair of nude bathers in a roadside pond was there to surprise and embarrass peeping neighbors; a caricature of Richard Nixon, completed at the height of the Watergate scandal, was installed in a swamp, perpetually “going down” into the muck; and his three-dimensional rendition of Christina Olson, the local woman of *Christina’s World* fame, playfully inverted Andrew Wyeth’s well-known composition, because Langlais “thought it would be interesting to see her face.” Inspired by local themes and livelihoods, surrounded by his deeply personal art, and weathered in his appearance—with splinters and sawdust in every crevice—Langlais returned to his roots in every meaning of the word.

The subject of countless journalistic flourishes in the 1970s, Langlais’s art environment became a popular destination for summer visitors to Maine’s mid-coast. Langlais described an occasion when he was working in the yard and a tourist began wandering around the property. “He walked up to me and said, ‘What do you call this place?’ I looked at him and said ‘Home.’ It was the only thing I could think of.”



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This exhibition is supported by the **Kohler Trust for Arts and Education**, the **FredERIC CORNELL KOHLER CHARITABLE TRUST**, **Kohler Foundation, Inc.**, and the **Wisconsin Arts Board** with funds from the **State of Wisconsin** and the **National Endowment for the Arts**.

Cover: Bernard Langlais in Cushing, Maine, 1976. Photo: David Hiser.

1 Bernard Langlais, *Winter in Oslo*, 1954–55; oil on canvas; 24 1/2 x 18 in. Colby College Museum of Art, The Bernard Langlais Collection, Gift of Helen Friend Langlais.

2 Installation view of exhibition “Bernard Langlais” at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, March 21–April 8, 1961. Photograph © 2021 Estate of Rudy Burckhardt / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

3 Bernard Langlais with *Untitled (Three Lions)* and *Alligator*, 1976. Photo: David Hiser.

4 Bernard Langlais in Cushing, Maine, 1976. Photo: David Hiser.