

EDGES

David Sears

A Matinicus Artist Charts His Course

CARL LITTLE



Sitting down to interview David Sears in his High Water Studio on Matinicus Island this past October, my attention was continually drawn to the paintings that surrounded us. On one wall hung a handsome clutch of acrylic studies of stones. Elsewhere, a seagull eyed me from behind a white wing, and land- and seascapes, some of them built from dots, shimmered and swayed.

Most compelling of all were Sears's chart pieces, dazzling inventions that play with the idea of Maine islands, coastlines and passages. And here is where the amazement kicks in: This special ed teacher from Pennsylvania only took up a paintbrush around 10 years ago and already has achieved a signature way of representing the world.

Sears came to art late. Born in Brockton, Massachusetts, in 1949, he earned degrees in education from Ursinus College and Temple University, dedicating his life to helping kids—and their teachers—address the challenges of special needs in private and public schools in Pennsylvania. There were a few art courses along the way, and a visit to the studio of sculptor and designer Arieto “Harry” Bertoia, where Sears fell in love with the idea of living the life of an artist.

Always maintaining a creative outlet, including still photography and film, Sears fantasized about making a career from this work. Then, around 2000, he began homeschooling himself in the ways of acrylic, pastel and watercolor. He started out being “very tight-ass and realistic,” he said, but kept moving further away from strict representation.

Growing more confident, Sears began to consider paint-

ing full-time. On a New England college tour with his son in 2003, he experienced an epiphany. While wandering through the studios at the Maine College of Art in Portland, he felt completely at home—and ready to embark on a second career.

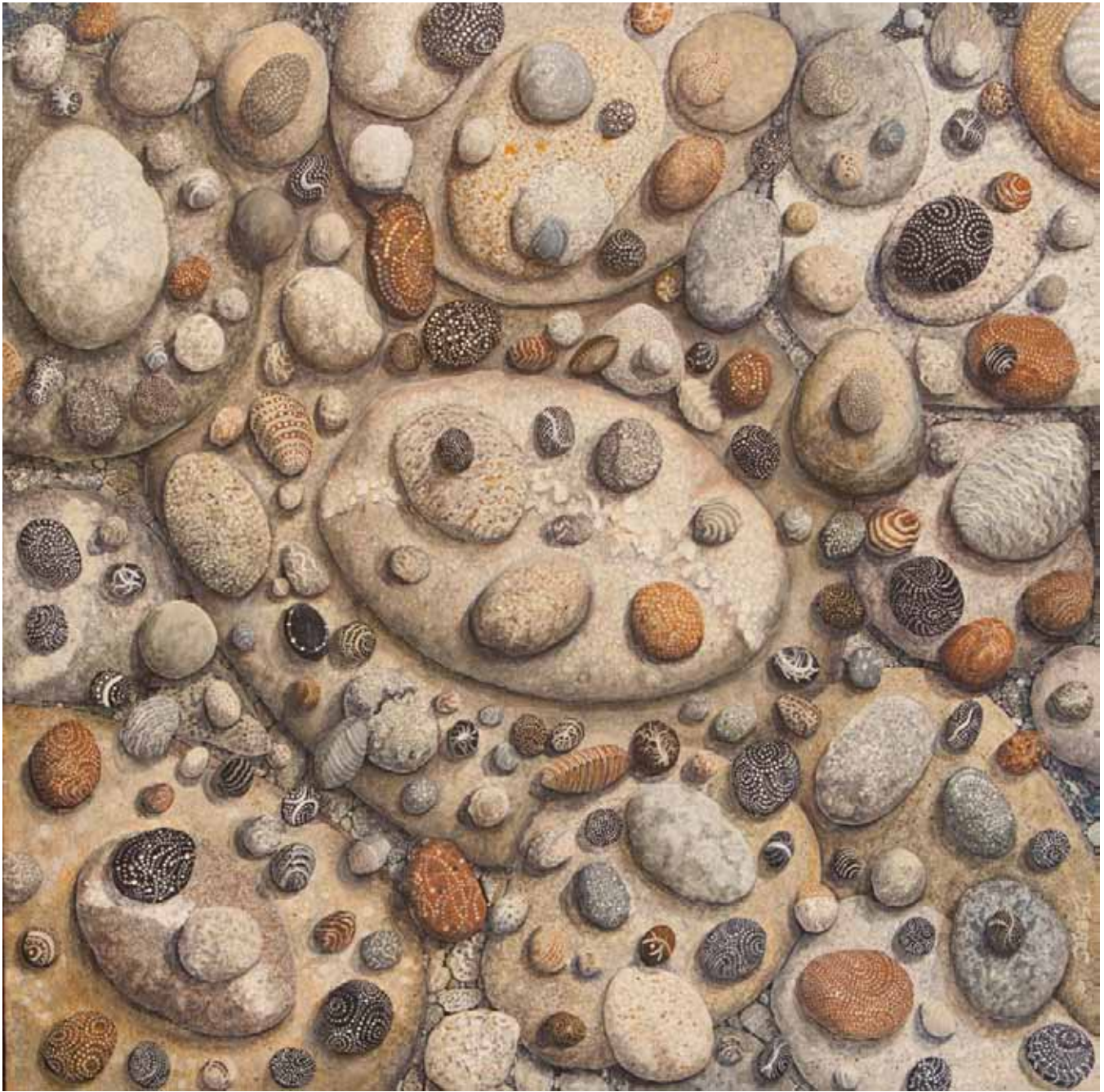
All along, Sears learned from copying, often turning to art books for inspiration. He remembers that trying to reproduce a Stephen Etnier seascape taught him how to feather the paint. His images of cobblestones, inspired by visits to Condon Cove on Matinicus, in many respects pay homage to Alan Magee, that master realist whose work Sears greatly admires.

In the chart pieces Sears often pays tribute to his favorite American artists, among them, Jasper Johns, Robert Indiana, Brice Marden and Sol LeWitt, incorporating their stylistic traits. Painting titles are sometimes spelled out with lettered Bananagrams tiles affixed to the frame, an idea Sears borrowed from Jamie Wyeth, who has used Scrabble pieces in a similar manner in some of his seagull paintings.

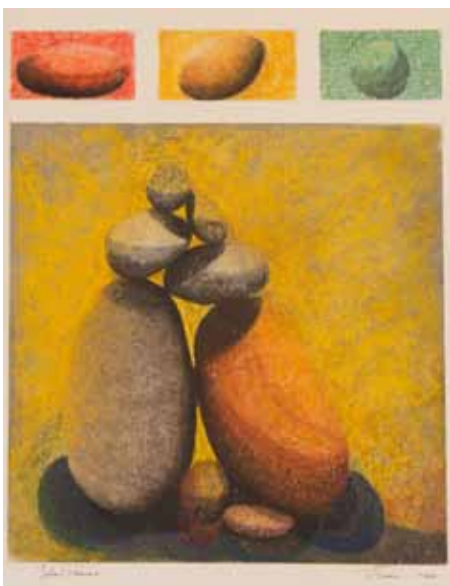
The painter deploys dots—strings, circles and arcing lines of them—in a manner that recalls Australian aboriginal art. The dots serve as a way to convey the idea of routes, sometimes real, sometimes random. At times, actual nautical charts are the foundation for these paintings, but just as often the configurations of islands and coastline are imaginary, or based loosely on concepts of land and water. The paintings have a decorative appeal, like quilts. Indeed, the complex overlays are a kind of embroidery.



Approaches



42 Black Rocks



Yellow Stones



Ledge



Archipelago



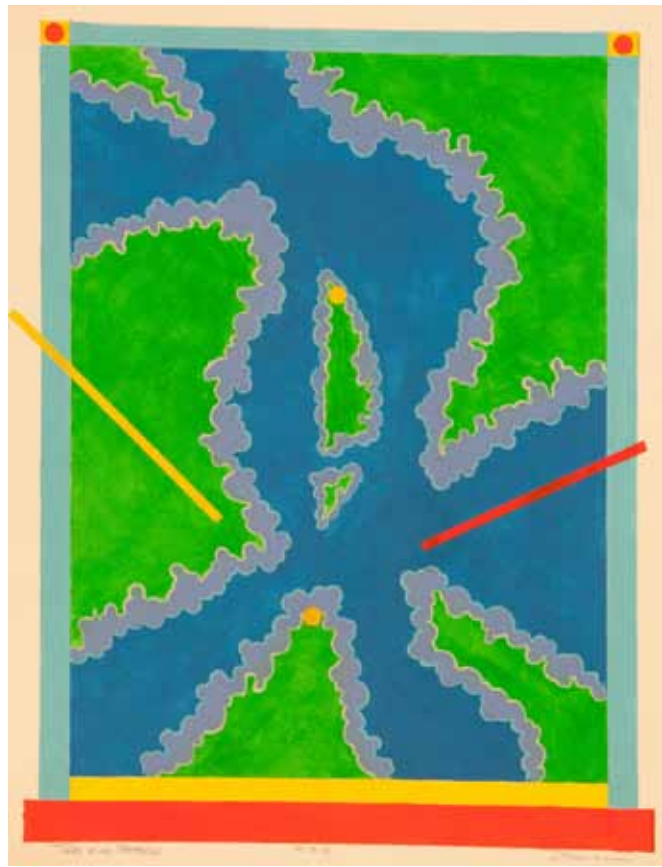
Above: Cloud Bank



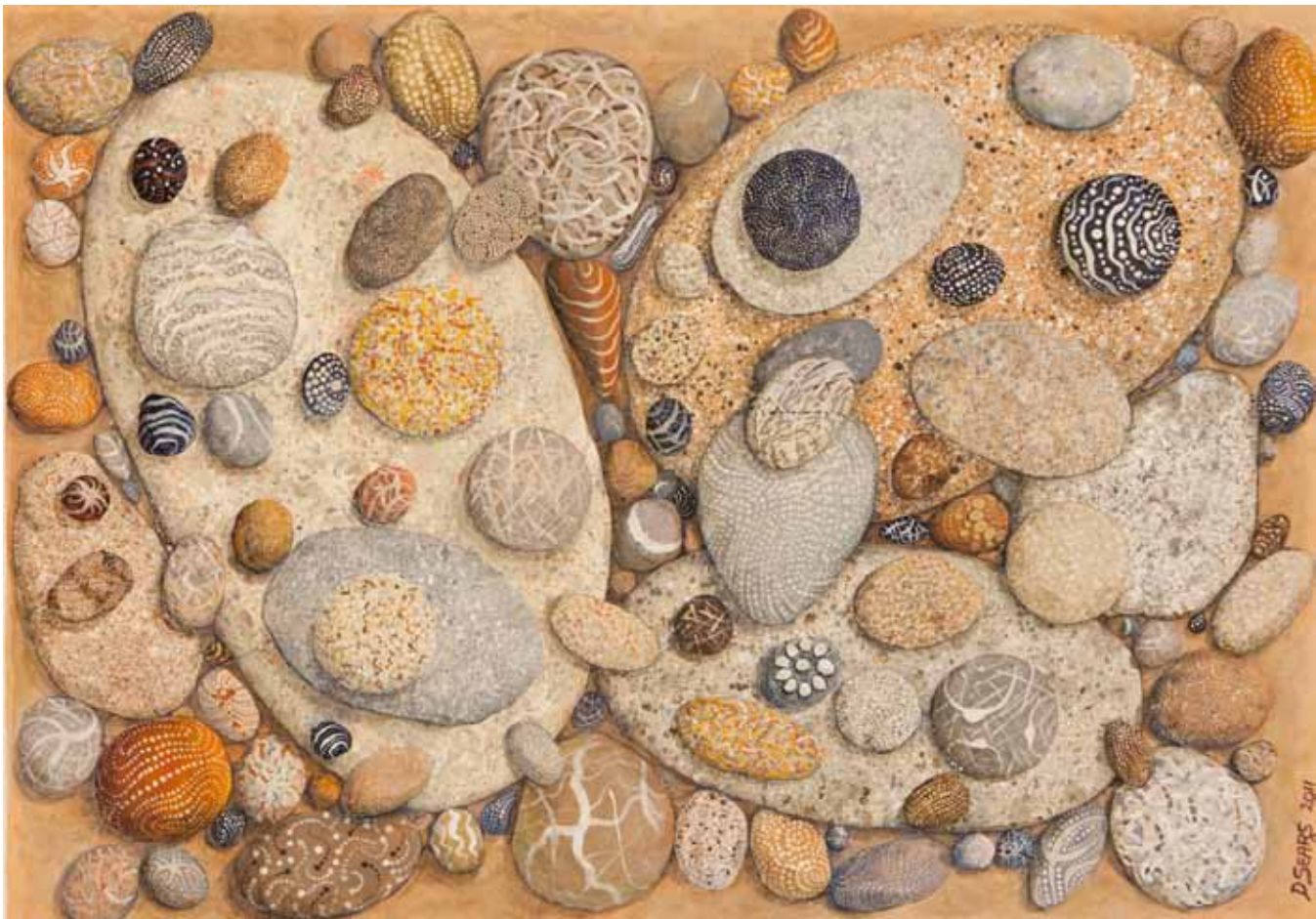
Left: Inside Passage



Islands



There Is No Pattern



Consciousness of Stones

Right: Bright Wave



To hear David Sears describe his paintings and to see more of his work, download the Island Journal for iPad® and Android™.



Sears works almost exclusively in acrylic, although he has taken to labeling some of his recent pieces “water medium,” because the paint has been diluted to near transparency. He continues to experiment with various formats and ideas. During our visit he shared three new panels that take the chart idea into more-conceptual realms. One of them, Frecon Bay, was inspired by an abstraction by New York painter Suzan Frecon.

How did Sears end up on Matinicus, one of Maine’s most remote islands? He and his wife Judy started visiting nearly 20 years ago as seasonal renters. They sought a retreat of sorts, but also a world that might replace a Cape Cod they had once loved, but that had become overrun and even hostile. With their adopted Korean children, Abbie and Ben, they found a home away from home, which is Erwinna in upper Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

In 2005 the couple bought an island house. After six years of renovations, the place feels new, yet its history remains visible. A previous resident scratched the ghostly

outlines of masted boats into the plaster walls of the living room, while someone else painted the lines of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s famous “Matinicus Sonnet” along the top of the wall in the kitchen.

The simple and airy High Water Studio a few steps from the back door now serves as Sears’s haunt from April to October. He considers himself a Matinicus painter, and he likes the fact that fellow islanders respect his commitment to art. “It comes down to what you do to contribute to the island,” he states, as the interview comes to a close. In any case, Sears says, “I’m having fun,” adding, “Where do you stop? No idea.”

Carl Little is the author of Edward Hopper’s New England, The Watercolors of John Singer Sargent, Art of the Maine Islands, and many other books. His poetry has appeared in the Paris Review, Hudson Review, and other literary journals, as well as in the collection Ocean Drinker: New & Selected Poems. Little lives on Mount Desert Island.