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Presenting Bernard Langlais

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With the Langlais sculpture Five Bears, 1976-77, Hannab Blunt takes a hands-on approach to her work at the Langlais estate.

Right: Bernard Langlais, Auk, 1977, painted wood, 49 1/2 x 13 1/2 x 28 inches. Colby College Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Bernard Langlais.

Hannah Blunt thought she was prepared for the world of Maine sculptor Bernard “Blackie” Langlais.

As a curatorial assistant at the Colby College Museum of Art in 2007, she’d worked with some of his abstract works for a show there. Later she’d used Langlais’s (pronounced “Lang-lee”) work in graduate school projects at Boston University. But when Blunt moved into the late artist’s farmhouse on the Maine coast four years ago, charged with taking stock of the estate left to the College, she was bowled over.

“It was beyond words,” said Blunt, now Langlais Curator for Special Projects. “The estimate in gifting documents to

Colby will keep about 175 works, many of which will be part of a Langlais show at the Colby museum opening July 19. While some works were consigned to be sold, the vast majority were given to the Kohler Foundation, which is preserving and distributing Langlais art throughout Maine and beyond (see sidebar at colby.edu/mag). The land trust will own the 90 acres of fields and woodland, which will include a park featuring some of Langlais’s totem-like sculptures.

For Blunt, the disposition of the estate is the end of a process that began as she explored the overgrown fields, barns, and storage buildings on the Cushing property. Langlais’s home-built studios were intact, with his tools in place and some

Presenting the Wonderful World of Bernard Langlais

Creative collaboration preserves the work and vision of iconic Maine artist

By Gerry Boyle '78 @gerryatcolby Onsite photography by Fred Field



Colby was something like fifteen hundred works. I discovered about two thousand more—mostly works on paper, early sketchbooks, and drawings—that had not been inventoried. They were stuck in baskets and chests and barns.”

And now that work is out in the world.

The work of the iconic Maine artist, best known for his massive wooden sculptures of animals, was left to Colby by his widow, Helen Friend Langlais, who died in 2010. In addition to the art, the gift included the couple’s waterfront property in the coastal town of Cushing.

The gift presented both an opportunity and a challenge for Colby, which was not equipped to oversee a collection of monumental sculptures and acreage 50 miles from campus. At Blunt’s suggestion, the College teamed up with the Kohler Foundation of Wisconsin and Georges River Land Trust to preserve Langlais’s legacy.

uncompleted works unchanged since the time of the artist’s death, in 1977.

“When he was alive and working, nothing was ever really finished,” she said. “It was this kind of work in progress. He’d place it on a building or outside and then he’d move it. If you look at photographs of the property, things are moved around all the time. It was this dynamic, ongoing process.”

The creative process was ongoing, but Langlais had found his final canvas—the farm overlooking the St. George River. It was a journey that began in Old Town, Maine, north of Bangor, where he grew up. The son of a carpenter, Langlais moved to Washington, D.C., after high school in 1940 intending to become a commercial artist. After six years in the Navy during World War II, he studied painting at the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, D.C. Langlais then moved to New York City and quickly passed through several then-emerging genres, including cubism and abstract expressionism. But it was wood that inspired him,

and his wooden abstract reliefs vaulted him into fast artistic company. Langlais was given a solo show by the Leo Castelli Gallery, which launched the careers of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and others. “He got hot very fast, and the fame and limelight took its toll on him,” said Blunt, who has written an essay on Langlais for a catalogue to accompany the Colby show. “He was thrust into this world of parties and social pressures.”



Bernard Langlais, Jungle Relief, cir. 1974, Langlais Estate, Cushing, Maine.

And as quickly as his star rose, it began to fall. Langlais began doing figurative, representative sculptures, rather than abstract work—taboo in the art circles of the time. The couple began spending more and more time at a summer cottage in Cushing. In 1966 they bought the adjacent farm and left New York behind.

Langlais, Blunt said, turned away from the trends in the art of his time and followed what she describes as “the pull of Maine.” Instead of the galleries and galas in New York, he

spent his time in the workshop behind the Cushing farmhouse and in the rustic studio above it, with its wood-burning stove.

“He made this splash, did something very innovative,” Blunt said. “He was very of the moment in what he was creating, relating to other trends going on around him. And rather than getting caught up in that and feeding off of the celebrity status and creating work that people wanted him to continue to make, he followed his instincts. What was important to

“ He created figures that were as simple and symbolic as they could be and still convey something.

—Hannah Blunt,
Langlais Curator for
Special Projects



Bernard Langlais, Untitled (Leopard), 1975, weathered and painted wood, 28 1/4 x 66 x 2 1/2 inches. Colby College Museum of Art, The Bernard Langlais Collection, Gift of Helen Friend Langlais.

him in being an artist was continuing to make work that interested *him*.”

Though Langlais continued to show his work, his audience changed, as did his subjects. The farm was home to livestock and cats and dogs, and soon his imaginative wooden representations as well. The new work was dismissed in art circles as folksy and craftsmanlike, but Langlais, settled into his life as artist/farmer in small-town Maine, paid no regard to the critics.

“Simple and childlike—that was a term he used,” Blunt said. “He created figures that were as simple and symbolic as they could be and still convey something. That was the idiom he was interested in.”

His decision to follow his internal muse is what makes his work distinctive—and worth continued study, she said. “I think the thing that’s exciting about him—and the thing that people maybe haven’t recognized until now and we are trying to present in this exhibition and this catalogue project—is that the seeds of that were there from the beginning. There’s this thread to follow, that that’s where he ended up, surrounded by his art and integrating his art with his life, really living in a place that was connected to his roots. You can see that thread running through from very early on.”

That was one of the reasons Colby, beginning with former museum director the late Hugh Gourley, was so interested in Langlais’s body of work.

Living in the Langlais home, and spending long days sifting through the barns and workshops, dusty boxes, and drawers, gave Blunt an understanding of Langlais’s vision, she said. “I did have a lot of dreams about him. When you’re thinking about somebody all day every day, surrounded by his life’s work, it sort of gets inside of you.”

She also came to appreciate and admire Helen Langlais, who saw the significance of her husband’s contribution and spent decades working tirelessly to preserve his legacy. That effort, Blunt concluded, is in some ways just as remarkable as Langlais’s accomplishments.

Helen Langlais, she said, kept meticulous notes and records of life at the farm, including an episode in the 1990s in which she and others were preparing a sculpture of a dog for transportation to an exhibit.

“They turned it over,” Blunt said, “and a wooden bone fell out of its mouth, a bone he had stuck inside. There he was, popping up fifteen years after his death.”

Helen Langlais wrote, “One of his plans to amuse and delight us.”

Amusement and delight, say all concerned with this effort, will continue far and wide, for many years to come. ©

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Bernard Langlais, Local Girl (Christina Olson), 1968. Langlais Estate, Cushing, Maine.