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'Spaces & Places': A Group Show at the Supreme Court Gallery

Curators David Schutz and Mary Admasian present a themed show of works by painters Anne Davis, Jamie Rauchman and James Secor.

By [ALICE DODGE](#)

Published August 6, 2025 at 10:00 a.m. | Updated August 6, 2025 at 10:56 a.m.



"Tree (Evening Capitol)" by James Secor

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Shortly after justice Marilyn Skoglund was appointed to the Vermont Supreme Court nearly 20 years ago, state curator David Schutz recalled, she phoned him and asked, "David, can we *please* get rid of the dead justices?"

After moving the paintings of late esteemed jurists upstairs — the only portrait in the entry now is of retired justice Skoglund herself — Skoglund and Schutz took the opportunity to show contemporary Vermont artists in the building's lobby.

Two factors have made the **Supreme Court Gallery** arguably one of the most coveted spots in the state for artists to present their work. One is space — it is well suited to displaying large-scale paintings. The other is place. The storied building's marble halls lend legitimacy and importance to long-established and emerging artists alike.

Appropriate, then, that Schutz and cocurator Mary Admasian have organized "Spaces & Places," a show of paintings by Anne Davis, Jamie Rauchman and **James Secor**, on view through September 30. It marks the introduction of themed group shows for the institution.

Instead of presenting only the room's interior, we get the artist's, as well.

Admasian is an artist and independent curator who has worked with the state curator's office as a consultant for years. She said the team there, which manages artworks throughout the Capitol District, has been inspired to expand beyond the Supreme Court Gallery's typical solo exhibitions by putting together the annual Art at the Kent show — upcoming in September at the Kent Museum in Calais. "There are so many incredible artists in Vermont that we really want to exhibit," she said, "and we only do four shows a year."

The "Spaces & Places" curators have adeptly managed a tricky task: including more artists while still offering enough depth to give visitors a full sense of their project and vision. More than that, the paintings play off each other beautifully, prompting the viewer to consider how each artist uses space and place in their work.



"A Room Somewhere" by Jamie Rauchman

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Rauchman's canvases — which, like many of the works in the show, are quite large — make the most use of illusionistic space, often depicting the artist's studio. But instead of presenting only the room's interior, we get the artist's, as well. "The Invisible Man," for instance, shows Rauchman, nude, standing in a room filled with paintings, boxes, laundry, a folding chair. But the background has come forward to eclipse most of the figure, making an optical illusion wherein the artist's body frames his environment.

Other works feature strange, tentacled creatures — one oozing onto the floor while considering its own portrait in "Forbidden Self," one lounging casually on a couch in "Odalisque." They're funny stand-ins for the artist, with a

disturbing edge made sharper by their clear, meticulously observed surroundings.

Throughout the paintings on display, Rauchman toes the line between real and imagined spaces, interiors and exteriors. "The Shining Cloud" shows a spectacular winter landscape through a car's windshield. It captures the experience many Vermonters have of seeing our most stunning views while driving and seems to ask us what it is we're looking at. Is it an interior? Is the car an extension of the body? Is the landscape fully outside the car or part of the experience of driving?

One of the show's smart curatorial pairings is Rauchman's "A Room Somewhere" with Secor's "Hanging Guitar." Both portray a view out the studio window, using a similar purplish palette, but the works are utterly different. Rauchman's, immersive at 4-by-4-feet, invites the viewer to poke at the illusion. The lawn beyond the window is a deep, real space differentiated from shallower canvases on the wall next to it. Light reflecting off the floor creates a hyperreal surface — the air in the studio is palpable.

Secor defines his world though intense color and texture more than illusion. His palette is utterly unique, employing sherbet-orange and Pepto Bismol-pink as staple hues where other artists might use blue or green. In "Hanging Guitar," pale yellow light spills from the view of Montpelier outside — with a coral sky and turquoise Camel's Hump in the background — onto the green-and-pink windowsill, illuminating just the edges of paintings leaning in a stack nearby. A lamp's vertical pole divides the 3-by-4-foot canvas almost in half. In one section, bright blue underpainting shows through, not defining any object but creating an unexpected flare that's crucial to the unusual composition.

Yellow light returns in "Cochran's," this time falling in stripes across the ski lodge's tables, playing against other stripes and still more stripes: diagonals right and left, a skier's outfit, the trees outside. The 4-by-5-foot scene should be utterly dizzying, but instead the viewer is taken in by the strangely coherent geometry of the scene and the figures within it. A boy looks directly at the viewer over a sandwich; the others' half-shadowed faces seem isolated and pensive for such a happy locale.



"Fish Dinner" by Anne Davis

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Across the gallery, whatever is taking place in Anne Davis' "Only the Dog" is equally enigmatic. The large canvas shows a group of people at a bar, their features defined only barely, almost like cartoons, but with such nuance that the scene is emotional and haunting, the figures accusatory. The dog in the center of the painting stares with alarm at something we don't see.

As Davis noted at the opening reception, she paints tables a lot: people at tables, people eating. Viewing her paintings is not dissimilar to being a guest at a dinner where everyone else has history: You might not know what's going on, but you know that *something* is.

Davis' works often veer into the surreal, as with "Fish Dinner," in which a woman, a cat and a dog seem to have turned their meal over to a family of bears. Until a week before the show, Davis said at the reception, the figures were human, but she was bored with them. She'd been wanting to put bears in a painting, and it was clear to her that they belonged in this one. Each of her works uses these kinds of open-ended associations to create new narrative possibilities.

One of the things art does best is to present a new perspective on something familiar, and there's a meta-version of that effect in this show. Secor's "Tree (Evening Capitol)" pictures the Statehouse and the Supreme Court building, but they are dwarfed by a massive, multicolored tree; a teal lawn and turquoise mountain rising behind it provide an electric backdrop. It's surprising to see such a new and different vision of the Capitol complex as much as it is welcome to see a shift in the gallery's programming, especially if the result is shows like this one.

At the reception, Schutz told visitors to place their own red dots elsewhere: He'd already bought that piece.

"Spaces & Places," on view through September 30 at the Supreme Court Gallery in Montpelier. curator.vermont.gov

The original print version of this article was headlined "The Placemakers | A group show at the Supreme Court Gallery articulates the spatial"

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