EDITOR'S PICK

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ART TAKES ROOT IN NEW BEDFORD

THE SOUTH COAST CULTIVATES LOVE AND LABOR

By Heather Stivison · Thursday, November 5th, 2026 · 5 min read



John Borowicz, Numinous Among The Ten Thousand Things, 2026, oil on canvas, 60” x 48”. Courtesy of the New Bedford Art Museum.

“agriCultural: A Biennial Exhibition” is a fresh and timely, multidisciplinary exhibition on view through November 29 at the New Bedford Art Museum. Presented in partnership with the Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership (SEMAP), the exhibition underscores the intertwined regional legacies of art and farming and the ways they inform the South Coast’s distinctive cultural identity.

The region, which stretches across the Massachusetts border into

The region, which stretches across the Massachusetts border into coastal Rhode Island, was branded as the "Farm and Coast" or "Farm Coast" region by local businesses in the early part of this century. But its history as a coastal farming region goes back thousands of years to the cultivation of corn, beans and squash by the Wampanoag Nation.

The South Coast is also noted for a strong artistic legacy that was once supported by the whaling industry. In the 1840s-1850s New Bedford was the wealthiest city per capita in the world, and the artistic legacy it spawned continues to this day with active communities of artmakers living and working throughout the region.



Kristen Tool, Pollinator Garden, 2018, scrimshaw, ink, salvaged antique ivory, 11" x 34" x 2". Photograph by Heather Stivison.

Executive Director and Chief Curator Suzanne de Vegh observed, "With '*agriCultural*,' we are bringing together two essential forms of human creativity — art making and farming — to illuminate the

human creativity — art making and farming — to illuminate the profound connections between the land, our cultural heritage, and our collective future." The two fields seem disparate at first glance, but they both require observation, imagination, experimentation, transformation and specialized knowledge. Many of the artists in this exhibition cross back and forth between the two endeavors.

Visitors are greeted by "Shared Architecture," a three-dimensional work created by Rhode Island-based ecological artist Susan Medyn. It is the perfect example of intertwining the region's farming and artmaking. Medyn, an artist well-known for her watercolors, is also a master beekeeper trained through Cornell Cooperative Extension.

For this mixed-media artwork, she used strips of chair caning material to create curves and curls that she inserted, along with prisms and twigs, into a framework that was then placed directly into one of her hives. Her bees responded by building natural wax constructions into and onto her work, reshaping it and becoming co-authors of the piece. She said she hopes to promote awareness of the importance of sustaining insect life and that her work "challenges viewers to closely examine behaviors and geometries that often go unnoticed."

Kristen Tool also intertwines art and farming. She holds a BFA from the Academy of Art University in San Francisco and creates watercolors and jewelry. She also co-owns Olsen Farm in

Lanesborough, Massachusetts, where she raises chickens and

Lakesborough, Massachusetts, where she raises chickens and honeybees and grows fruit trees, berries, vegetables and herbs. For her artwork, “Pollinator Garden,” she used a scrimshaw technique to engrave wildflowers and native plants into the ivory keys of a broken piano keyboard found in a dumpster. Her delicate wildflowers climb up between the black keys in much the way plants find their way between cracks of the sidewalk — as if reminding us that nature prevails.

Michael Cochran, a professional sculptor for some 50 years, presents two works that reflect his memories of growing up on a farm in Northern California working alongside his father in the fields. He said these works “represent the stories about the many lessons that my father taught me, which I have been able to pass on to later generations.” The copper-plated work gloves in his sculpture, “A Long Row to Hoe,” serve to elevate the hard work behind the food we consume.

The entire exhibition invites us to consider the significance of our regional farmlands. It comes at an opportune moment, as many of us are feeling a deep-seated need to step away from the dehumanizing effects of our hyper-industrialized, screen-heavy environments.

The show speaks to our craving for a connection to the land around us and to the work of human

hands. As a culture, we have

hands. As a culture, we have begun to talk about farm-to-table food. We are finding joy in the tangible experiences of visiting local farmstands, marveling at the vibrant colors of heirloom varieties, or going right to the source, picking our own apples. These are sensory-rich experiences that are good for the soul. They make us pause and connect with the land and appreciate the individuals who farm it. That's the overarching goal of the exhibition.



Stephen Althouse, Rake I, 2003, archival pigment print, 48" x 36". Photo courtesy of the artist.

Exhibit partner SEMAP believes that "By bringing the agricultural and artistic communities into dialogue, the exhibition creates opportunities for new understanding, appreciation, and connection. It reminds us that farming is not simply an economic activity but an essential expression of culture, creativity, stewardship, and belonging."

Many of the works in the show take simple farm things and elevate them to new levels of meaning. "Rake 1," Stephen Althouse's four foot

them to new levels of meaning. "Rake 1," Stephen Arthouse's four-foot-tall back-and-white photograph, takes a common farm tool and turns it into a powerful moment of stillness and reflection. He described his enigmatic photograph as "... an expression of mystery that I feel about humanity; a blending of our strengths and weaknesses, our perseverance, sacrifice, and perhaps a degree of nobleness ..."

A dreamlike mystery is also apparent in the technically masterful, five-foot-wide, black-and-white oil painting of a cow by John Borowicz. Titled "Numinous Among The Ten Thousand Things," it seems to reference Daoism, Buddhism and the awe-inspiring presence of the divine. It is a sacred awe-inspiring feeling beyond the everyday world — though not necessarily religious.

There's something mysterious in JP Powel's "Panic Grasses" oil painting, too. His work speaks of finding the miracle and enigma in the mundane. The simple grasses beneath our feet are alive and in motion, begging us to delight in the simple gifts of nature.

Ultimately, "agriCultural" invites us to rethink regional agriculture, to rediscover the dignity of working the land and to recognize the sense of place it fosters.

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