



## DAN DOWD

**Dan Dowd** draws inspiration from materials and patinas, found objects and fragments. Histories recorded on material surfaces through manufacture, use, wear and maculation inform the choices he makes in his idiosyncratic assemblages. Suggestions of body parts, humor, and identity play supporting roles to the materiality of Dowd's practice, which emphasizes repair, re-use, and transformation as key themes.

Dan Dowd has been working as an artist since moving to Phippsburg, Maine in 2001, and has worked as a security officer at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art since 2007. Recent solo and two-person exhibitions include *Resurface*, Magenta Plains, New York, NY (2024); *Found and Gifted*, Danforth Museum, Framingham, MA (2021–22); *Paintings & Assemblages*, with Katherine Bradford, Caldbeck Gallery, Rockland, ME (2021); and *Thick-Skinned*, University of Maine Museum of Art, Orono, ME (2016). He has also been included in group exhibitions at Caldbeck Gallery (2024, 2023, 2022); bG Gallery, Santa Monica, CA (2021, 2019); Maine Maritime Museum, Bath, ME (2018); Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens, East Boothbay, ME (2014); and the Danforth Museum of Art (2013).

Born in Upton, MA in 1966

Lives and works in Phippsburg, ME

*Two Coats of Paint*  
June 11, 2024

# TWO COATS OF PAINT

SOLO SHOWS

## Dan Dowd and the folds of memory



*Dan Dowd, Russ, 2021, gifted shop rags and found truck tire innertube rubber on found board, 36 x 36 x 8 inches*

Contributed by **Mark Wethli** / In **Ang Lee's** 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) travels to the desolate homestead of his murdered lover, Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), in hopes of claiming his ashes and spreading them on the mountain where they met and fell in love many summers before. Jack's father, knowing and disdainful, denies his request. While exploring Jack's sparsely furnished boyhood room in search of something to remember him by, Ennis discovers a narrow, uncanny space at the back of the closet. In it he finds Jack's denim jacket (blood-stained from a fistfight they'd had years before) hung over a shirt of his own on a single hanger, the two closeted garments symbolically embracing. The rougher denim, cloaking and protecting the softer cotton, reflects a relationship that might have been but was not allowed to endure in 1960s Wyoming. Ennis clutches the garments to his chest, the top of the hanger pressed against his face in the shape of a question mark, as he confronts his loss and the role his fears played in Jack's tragic death.



I thought of this scene as I viewed **Dan Dowd's intimate and poetic work**, now at **Magenta Plains**, in his first New York solo exhibition. The inclination to cathect feelings and memories onto objects is a common one. Clothing in particular echoes the shapes of our bodies; touches them; connotes gender, time, and economic status; and absorbs everything from our scent to our DNA. Dowd creates small, iconic assemblages out of found materials, including fragments of inner tubes, clothing, rags, and home décor. His father was a truck driver – hence the inner tubes – but there is much more to the work than autobiographical content. We don't need to know exactly where this bit of flannel or that piece of drapery came from or what they might have meant to someone else, but only that they came from *somewhere* and bore silent witness to the people, places, and events whose lives they touched. Like the closet scene in *Brokeback Mountain*, Dowd's work is powerful and deeply affecting because it connects us with something we've all experienced.



Dan Dowd, Found patched truck tire inner tube rubber, found quilt fragments on found board, 2012, 14 x 6 x 2 inches

The materials in Dowd's work acquire still greater resonance by virtue of his witty, elegant, and reductive compositions. **Picasso** once remarked that what made **Matisse** a great colorist wasn't the colors he chose but the colors he combined, and Dowd has a similarly deft instinct for juxtaposing materials from disparate sources. In *The big house III*, for instance, we see just three elements: a torn wool shirt, a scrap of pressed tin, and a fragment of drapery. The objects evoke three distinct epochs. The pressed tin reaches back a hundred years or more. The paisley drapery, given its design and discolored appearance, feels like a throwback to the '60s or '70s. The wool shirt is newer and could easily be something recently purchased at L.L. Bean.



Dan Dowd, *The big house III*, 2022, found wool shirt fragment, found tin ceiling fragment, gifted drapery fragment, 17 x 24 x 2 inches

We stop to wonder who might have walked beneath that tin ceiling; cooking, reading, sleeping, or raising a family. What young couple spent an afternoon in the early seventies putting up paisley drapes in their new apartment because they reminded them of the summer of '67? Finally, we might imagine whose arms embraced family and friends through the flannel sleeves of that fresh plaid shirt.

While each of us will arrive at our own conjectures about the theoretical histories embedded in the work, we're also drawn to *The big house III* for the casual elegance of its understated but perfectly calibrated composition. The lower two-thirds of this piece are divided horizontally into quarters, most obviously in the four tiles of the pressed tin but also in the matching number of iterations of the fabric design just below it. The printed pattern on the cloth above is divided into fifths, accented by a ripped seam and a subtler disruption in the paisley pattern directly below it, two-thirds of the way over, effecting a less apparent but overriding division of the composition into thirds. The dynamics and clarity of these familiar proportions impart a hidden geometry to the work; a subtle harmony that underscores the emotions ingrained in the materials.

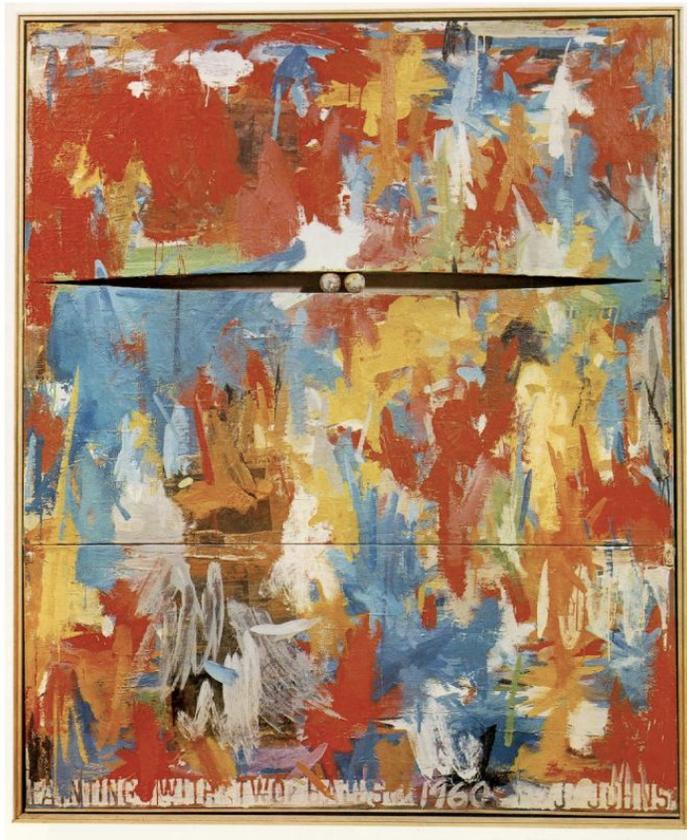


*Dan Dowd, Where have you been? Boots, 2023, Found boot rubber and cotton shirt on found board, 21 x 15 x 2 inches*

Often arranged in horizontal bands – vaguely reminiscent of landscapes or seascapes, but resolutely non-objective and concrete – Dowd’s materials also seem to wrap around an unseen support. Again, in line with the scene from *Brokeback Mountain*, this embracing gesture conjures the act of swaddling and more generally a profound sense of nurturing and caring. In other instances, his more pliable materials can appear to stretch close to breaking, adding yet another literal and metaphorical tension to the work.



*Dan Dowd, HCET, 2018, found truck inner tube rubber fragment and found jacket fragment on found board*



*Jasper Johns, Painting with Two Balls, 1960, encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 165.1 x 137.2 cm / 65 x 54 inches*

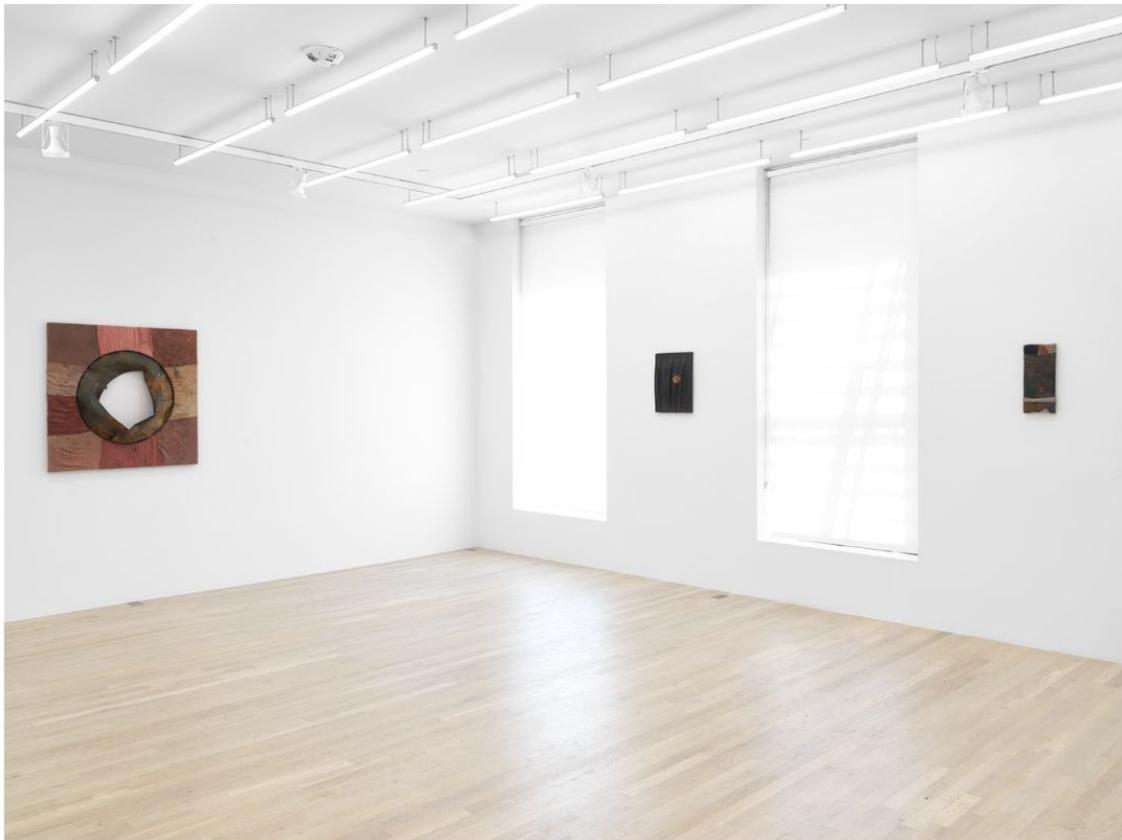
A common characteristic of Dowd's assemblages is their restraint, often limiting a piece to just two or three found items. *HCET* is one of his wittiest and most reductive works, including only two—an inner tube splayed open and laid flat, like an animal skin, just above the tightly stretched fabric of a blue jacket whose seams are scrupulously aligned vertically and horizontally. The remnants of the tire's valve stem and the taut seams of the jacket pocket make it the most minimal and erotic piece in the show. The pocket opening, very slightly parted, recalls **Jasper Johns's** comparably suggestive gesture in *Painting with Two Balls*, while the stunning color chord of the charcoal grey inner tube over a magnificent cerulean blue recalls the painting of **John Zurier**.



Dan Dowd, *BBL Today 2*, 2024, Found truck tire liner and found sheet on found board, 20 x 16 x 7 inches

Because art made from found objects constitutes a self-defined category in modern and contemporary art, Dowd's pieces enjoy a lively dialogue tracing back to Picasso, **Duchamp**, **Méret Oppenheim** and **Kurt Schwitters**, on to **Robert Rauschenberg** and **Joseph Cornell** at mid-century, and progressing to **Betye Saar**, **George Herms**, **David Hammons**, **Joe Fyfe**, and **El Anatsui**, among others. At the same time, Dowd's work incorporates the intimate scale and casual finesse of Morandi and the organic qualities of Eva Hesse, but marked by its unique emphasis on the implied provenance of their found elements.

That said, Dowd is far less interested in historical precedent than he is in browsing through the latest discards at the Phippsburg Transfer Station, a waste and recycling facility not far from his home and studio in coastal Maine. When he finds something he's drawn to he often lays it on the floor, the better to see it from a new perspective and to let its history speak for itself, independent of its conventional context, value, or purpose. In the filtered sunlight of his studio deep in the Maine woods, Dan Dowd's beloved outcasts, drawn from all walks of life, take the stage and begin a new life, together, forever.



*Magenta Plains: Dan Dowd, Resurface, 2024, Installation View*

**“Dan Dowd: Resurface,”** Magenta Plains, 149 Canal Street, New York, NY. Through June 29, 2024.

*Metro West Daily News*  
October 29, 2021

# METROWEST DAILY NEWS

## On Exhibit: At the Danforth Art Museum



Danforth Art Museum Director and Curator Jessica Roscio discusses the exhibit, "Anne Lambert, The Way Things Go," Oct. 25, 2021.

Daily News And Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Art Illman



At the Danforth Art Museum, "For George Floyd, Denim," leather gloves, "8 knees for George Floyd," and "Wool and truck tire inner tube rubber," part of the "Dan Dowd, Found and Gifted" exhibit, Oct. 25, 2021.

Daily News And Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Art Illman



Dan Dowd's "Wall of Vessels" from "Dan Dowd: Found and Gifted" exhibit at the Danforth.

Courtesy/Danforth Museum Of Art At Framingham State University

*Bowdoin News*  
May 11, 2021

# Bowdoin

## House of Dowd Home to Artistic Interest

When Dan Dowd isn't working as a security guard at the Museum of Art, he's often creating art of his own at his home in Phippsburg.

The house reflects Dowd's eclectic style and is a showplace for the works he creates from found objects and discarded materials, so it's perhaps unsurprising that his home would be included in *The Maine House*, a book of photography dedicated to the spaces talented people have created for themselves.



Dan Dowd's living room, as featured in *The Maine House*.  
(Image: *The Maine House*, Amazon)

Authors Maura McEvoy, Basha Burwell, and Kathleen Hackett say *The Maine House* features not designer houses but those “created by the people who live in them, from artists to writers to fishermen, distinctive for their ingenuity, originality, and fierce individuality.”

A photo from the book capturing part of Dowd’s living room is [the last of nine featured images in the title’s Amazon listing](#).

Dowd’s home is also highlighted in Mary P. Harding’s art blog, *M Harding Art*, for the author’s “48 Hours with Artists and Maine Back Roads” feature; find it in “[Day Two—Phippsburg and Artist Dan Dowd](#).”

Maine Arts Journal  
Fall 2019



## *Dan Dowd*



I have been working with found materials for nearly 20 years. I often consider and wonder where my attraction to materials began. I'll cite two early events that I think steered me in the material direction. First, on many occasions when visiting my maternal grandparents in Grafton, Massachusetts, we would take a walk on the abandoned railroad tracks. My grandparents were interested in hunting for copper "year" nails that identified what year the railroad tie had been installed. On one of these walks, we discovered an old household dump just off the side of the tracks. We began digging. We unearthed old pieces of pottery, metal, old plastic fountain pen cases (one with a gold tip that I still have). We began collecting old pottery pieces that seemed to match and attempted to piece together a large old crock. That project was abandoned without sadness: a material re-assemblage that just lost its inherent interest. At this same time, I began discovering old house dumps near my childhood home and digging and finding old bottles and random scraps of someone's life.



Dan Dowd, 22F, found document drawer, wheel, lid, 25 x 20 x 5 in.

The second and more frequent event was our Saturday morning trips to the town dump. It was on these trips that our father would drop my brother and sister and me off at the metal scrap pile while he threw things away. We would search for shiny or rusty hubcaps and other metal things that caught our eye. We also were allowed to explore the burn pile if it was not smoking and would occasionally unearth a melted bottle or strange hulk of disfigured plastic.

Dump-picking morphed into thrift and antique shopping in my teens, 20s and 30s and when I moved to Phippsburg in 2001 my dump hunting reignited with new possibilities.

The Phippsburg Transfer Station is every scavenger's dream. You drive in to find a trailer to the right with a built on lean-to which covers large donated items that people may take away. (This trailer is a give-and-take shop sometimes called "Martha's," in honor of a long time much-loved Transfer Station attendant, or "The Plaza" because it sounds good).

To the left is the woodpile. It's exactly that, a large pile of wood. Doors, scrap wood, chairs, fence, shingles, bureaus, beams, old, new, in between. Same policy... Take what you want.

Around the corner is the metal pile. Water heaters, refrigerators, freezers, tools, fencing, lawnmowers, grills, fans, car parts, pipes, wire, buckets, gutters... you name it.

Next to the metal pile is the tire pile. No explanation needed.

When I first moved to town it quickly became a thing to do on Saturdays. Go to the dump, throw your trash, recycle and poke around. Did I need something for the house? A wheelbarrow for my front yard to put flowers in?



Dan Dowd, *Thick Skinned*, Installation view, University of Maine Museum of Art.

It quickly became a source of art material. I began collecting galvanized washtubs, I think because the cellar of the house I was raised in was full of them. They held nails of various sizes and anything else that could be contained by the bucket. I loved the patina, the marks, the dots, the scratches, the “skin” of the metal. At the same time, I began collecting containers and other domestic curiosities: old fuel tanks, metal heaters, scales, thermoses, anything with an interesting skin. These buckets and objects began to accumulate in my studio and eventually became one of my earlier series of assemblages. I began appropriating the objects and containers inside of the galvanized washtubs. I would secure them to the inside bottom of the tub and then install a wire to the bottom of the tub and hang them on the wall. The tubs served as a type of frame but they were much more important to the overall product. I enjoyed them singularly and also had the opportunity to install larger numbers of these as installations.



Dan Dowd, *Untitled*, found fabric, truck tire inner tube rubber, 12 x 7 x 3 in., (Collection of the University of Maine Museum of Art).

My most recent series stems from an attempt at spring cleaning a few years ago. I was trying to make some space in my closet and kept coming up against shirts or sweaters that I loved but never wore. I wondered and thought about this for some time and ultimately decided to bring these items into my studio. It was my way of letting them “live on.” Some of the fabrics that I find resemble things that I may have desired as a child but ultimately never had. Some of the fabric can feel a certain way or be a color that signals me to use it.

As clothes and blankets began to accumulate in my studio so did truck tire inner tubes from the tire pile. I have a relationship with tubes that goes back to my adolescence. My father was a truck driver and each summer he would bring a good tube home for us to use as our pool float for the summer, and if things went well it would be used in the winter as a sled.

The fabric and rubber began a relationship that started a series of assemblages that are usually built over pieces of scrap wood.

I choose fabric and rubber fragments that seem to me to have a similar patina and “age” or perceived level of use. Colors, patterns, and sometimes the actual material can be reasons for the pairing. I am interested in and consider where the materials were made, who made them, was it by machine or by hand, were they used/worn for a long time? How were they used? For what? Why were they ultimately discarded?

I wrap and fold the fabric and rubber and work to showcase what I consider their best or most interesting features: tears, stains, threadbare sections, bumps, accumulations—marks of life.

I do think ultimately these assemblages are about people, with life experiences and chance tossed into the mix.

I make every attempt to use as much of, if not all, of the fabric and rubber that I incorporate into this recent series. I don't like to waste things or contribute to the world's trash crisis. I like to think that I am making the world a little nicer for those who choose to live with my art.



Dan Dowd, *Untitled*, found raincoat, galvanized metal on found board, 41 x 41 x 6 in.

*The Mainers*  
March 16, 2018

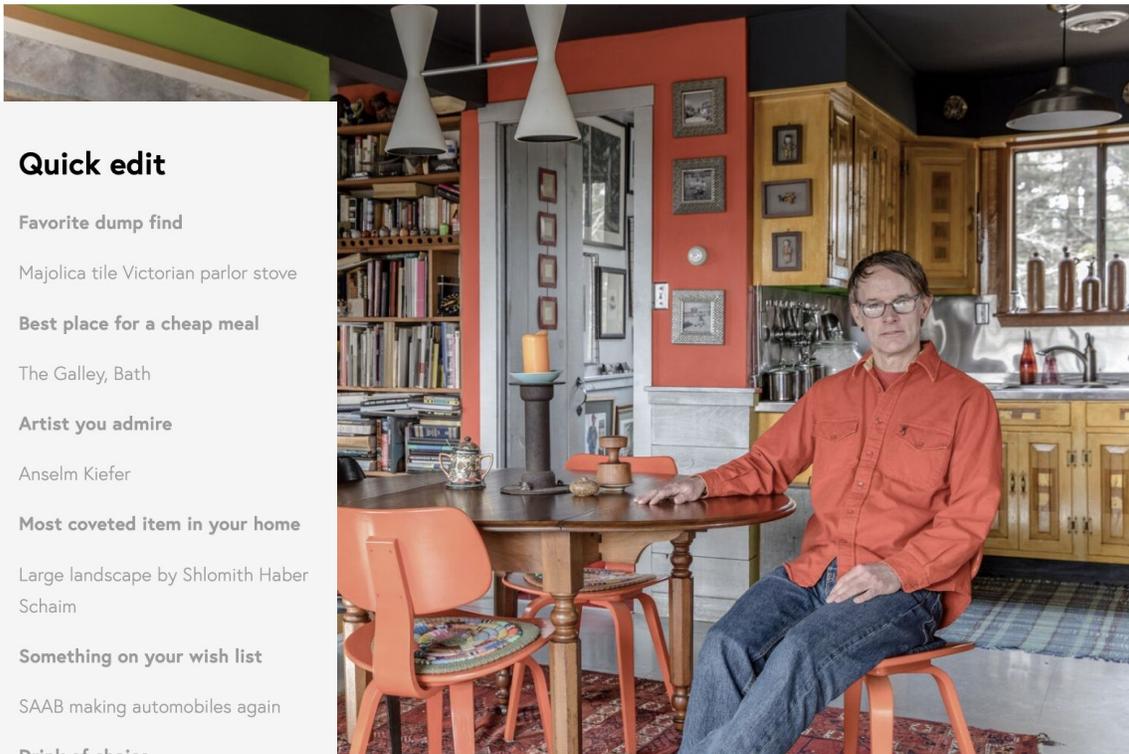
# THE MAINERS

## DAN DOWD

March 16, 2018

Dan Dowd is one of those mysteriously located, incredibly talented artists in Maine. Living in a small town on the coast with a little over 2,000 people, down a long dirt road that winds around until you see his orange painted stumps and metal-sided house on the hill, he has crafted a unique and fascinating space out of a dated seasonal home with views of the water. The interior is curated like a mix between a fun house and an art gallery. Always paying attention to budget, detail, humor, and style—Dan creates both artwork and intentional living space. His inventive and resourceful ways have remained constant throughout both, as well.

Dan shares with us how he approaches home improvement on a budget, art collecting, not being afraid of bold colors, his background in art, and his connection to Maine.



### Quick edit

#### Favorite dump find

Majolica tile Victorian parlor stove

#### Best place for a cheap meal

The Galley, Bath

#### Artist you admire

Anselm Kiefer

#### Most coveted item in your home

Large landscape by Shlomith Haber Schaim

#### Something on your wish list

SAAB making automobiles again

#### Drink of choice

Ruby Red Vodka with grapefruit San Pellegrino soda

**THE MAINERS:** Where were you born and how did you end up in Maine?

**DAN:** I was raised in Upton, MA— a small town west of Boston. My family started vacationing on the Maine coast when I was a child. I developed a love of Maine through these vacations with my family. Also, my high school art teacher, who summered on Deer Isle and Little Deer Isle, would bring back objects from Maine to use in still-lives in the classroom. These objects always had this patina and story to them, like using an old door as a backdrop. Her love of Maine through these objects made me think about it as a place to live.

After college when I was working in Massachusetts, I would come to Maine on weekends and for summer vacations. I moved to Maine in 2001 to focus on my artwork and to simplify my life. I moved to my house in Phippsburg, not far from Popham Beach. I am an active board member of the Phippsburg land trust. I love my town and the neighborhood I am part of.

**THE MAINERS:** Stepping inside your house is like stepping into a curated gallery of art and home furnishings. You clearly have an amazing sense of design and style. Can you tell us more about how you approach interior design in your living space?

**DAN:** Thank you. I love original art, unique objects, beautiful materials and color. I like to surround myself with things that I love and love to look at. I do think about creating related spaces and how room colors will work with other room colors. I enjoy combining beautiful things from different design periods.

My kitchen table is a solid walnut 19th century drop-leaf, it is next to a mahogany Empire buffet (the first piece of furniture I purchased for \$50 in 1986) that holds found rusted automobile springs, Italian maiolica, my grandparents gingerbread kitchen clock, and tropical house plants. A large 20th century landscape made by a friend is on the opposite wall. Hanging overhead is a white spun aluminum mid-century light fixture. The vintage mid-century Thonet kitchen chairs were given to me by a friend. I repainted one glossy black and the other three a bright orange/red. Multi-colored circular "granny cushions" sit on the seats.

**THE MAINERS:** The colors! Tell us more about your bold use of colors. So often you see homes stripped of any colors at all and just painted white. You seem to embrace color and use it as a way to enhance what you fill your space with. How do you settle on a color? How does living in a house full of colors make you feel on a daily basis?

**DAN:** I choose colors like I choose the items I put on my walls and in my house. I have to love the color. It is important to me that I love the color from the inside and from the outside. I often paint a wall, turn on all the lights and go outside of the house at night to make sure I like it from outside as well. Sometimes it will be simply a color I love and sometimes it may be a color that then highlights and connects with something that I have determined will be in that space.

**THE MAINERS:** So, clearly the interior of your home is amazing and you've done a marvelous job with it, but there's also a story about the home itself and how you acquired it and what you've done to improve it. Can you share with us the journey of your home renovations?

**DAN:** I purchased the house 16 years ago. It was used for many years as a seasonal house and was in poor condition. Friends reminded me of the "3 L's": Location, Location, Location, when I was deciding to buy it. I wanted to be near the ocean and have a view and I wanted privacy. Because the house is built high on a ledge it offers privacy from the roads below. My house is on a dead-end road and is only a few minutes drive from Popham Beach, Morse Mountain, and Hermit Island and Phippsburg offers many hiking and outdoor activities.

I never prepare a budget, but due to income restraints I have to be very frugal with just about everything I do. I chose to put down 26 gauge galvanized steel sheets (24-inch square in the kitchen/dining and living rooms; 12-inch in the entry foyer) as an inexpensive yet durable and unique thin flooring. It also reflects light well into the house to increase solar gain in winter months.

I don't believe in renovating to renovate. I believe in using things until they are no longer repairable. I still use the old electric stove that was in the kitchen when I purchased the house. It works well, and to make it more attractive I painted the oven drawer to match the orange/red kitchen chairs and painted the faux wood oven door handle silver.



**THE MAINERS:** Aside from your amazing design sense, you are also a gifted artist. Tell us about your artistic journey? Have you always been creative from a young age? How did you come to make art out of found objects?

**DAN:** Thank you again. I was told many times by my grandmother that my hands were always busy making things when I was young. I have many memories of drawing at a young age and enjoying elementary school art classes very much. I had a great high school art teacher and very strong fine art and art history professors in college. I think part of my found object interest began as a child— I grew up in a 100-year-old house that had a cellar full of metal shelves holding rusty tools, old paint cans, buckets of nails and other things I found interesting. I discovered old household dumps in my yard and in the woods. Digging for a "treasure" (e.g. a complete old glass bottle or old pottery shard) shaped how I look at the landscape.

My father would take me and my brother and sister to the town dump each Saturday morning and we would poke around the metal pile and huge ash pile where trash was burned. I would sometimes find and bring home a hub cap, glass bottle, or some other fragment that I found interesting.

**THE MAINERS:** You are the master of thrifting, dumpster diving (or okay, just visiting the local dump!), and finding incredible treasures for your art assembly and your space. Can you give us some tips? Also, what are some of your most amazing finds?

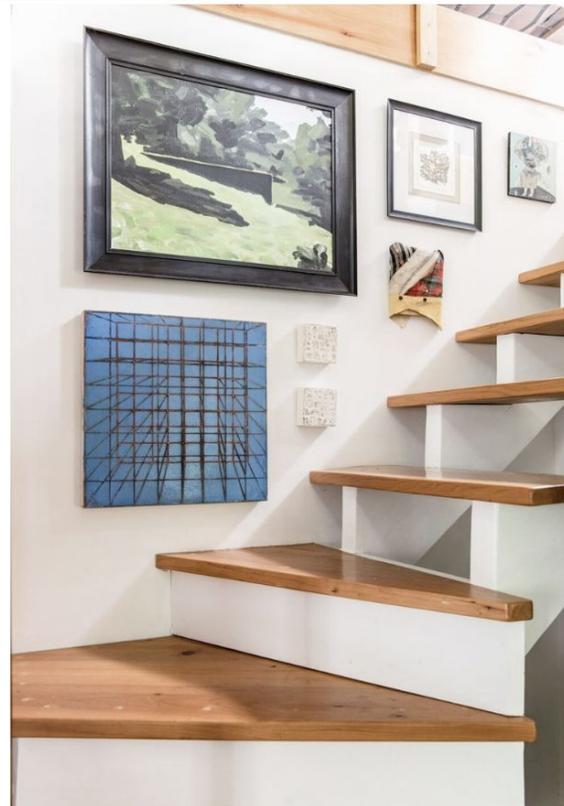
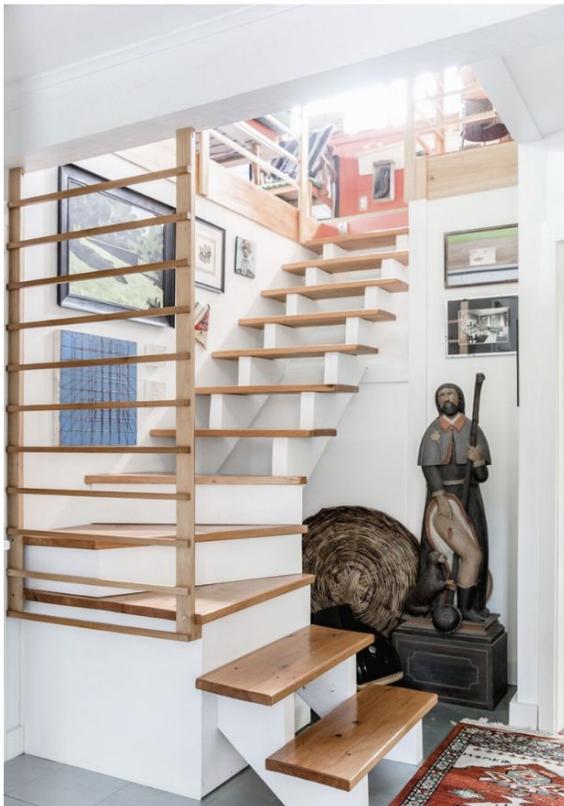
**DAN:** I love the hunt, I am particular, I love a bargain (free is even better), and I love to rescue something that someone else has discarded. Tips...ha! I would say don't be afraid to look and look some more. If you see something that appeals to you, consider using it as something it wasn't meant for. Display it. I think it's easy to buy things that will make your place look cool but bringing something into your house that you had some hand in creating will be more meaningful and interesting to you and for you to talk about.

One of the most amazing things I found was a 19th century parlor stove that was covered with majolica tiles made by one of the best tile makers of the time that was based in Massachusetts. I found some very early mantels and moldings that my partner and I incorporated into a summer room and some of the pieces were used in my assemblage art.



**THE MAINERS:** Orange! It's everywhere... you love it. Why?

**DAN:** I do love orange. I'm not sure why exactly. I think in a way I find the color funny because we sometimes associate it with an emergency. It's a warm color that I like to use as a room color specifically because of how great it looks lit up at night.



**THE MAINERS:** And SAABs... you are the SAAB guy. Where did this obsession come from? How many SAABs have you owned in your life? And one of your SAABs is part of a project you're working on, so definitely tell us more about that!

**DAN:** I think I'm a SAAB guy because my grandfather was a Volvo guy. He would take my brother and I to look at SAABs in the 1970's and I always liked their design. When I started driving, I was interested in their safety, quality, and front-wheel drive. I am always surprised by how much cargo I can fit into the hatchbacks with the rear seats folded down. They are also quirky— the ignition is found between the 2 front seats and the dashboards resemble the cockpit of an airplane (a direct influence of the jets that parent company SAAB built for Sweden). The windshields also have a significant bend. I have had 11 SAABS; old body-style 900s are my favorite. I drove my 1991 SAAB 900s to 307,000 miles.

I acquired my 1988 SAAB 900 turbo from friends. It needed some love but had life left in it at 176,000. I painted the alloy wheels orange, had orange racing stripes painted on it, and made colorful interior modifications to it. This car became Projekt 900, a photo series and installation I created for the Ogunquit Museum of American Art to bring attention to the FDA ban of gay men from donating blood at American Blood Banks. I drove the car to 276,000 miles but the Maine winters caught up with it and it had to be taken off the road for rust issues. I continue to take pictures of people with the SAAB as a record of the numbers of people it has touched.





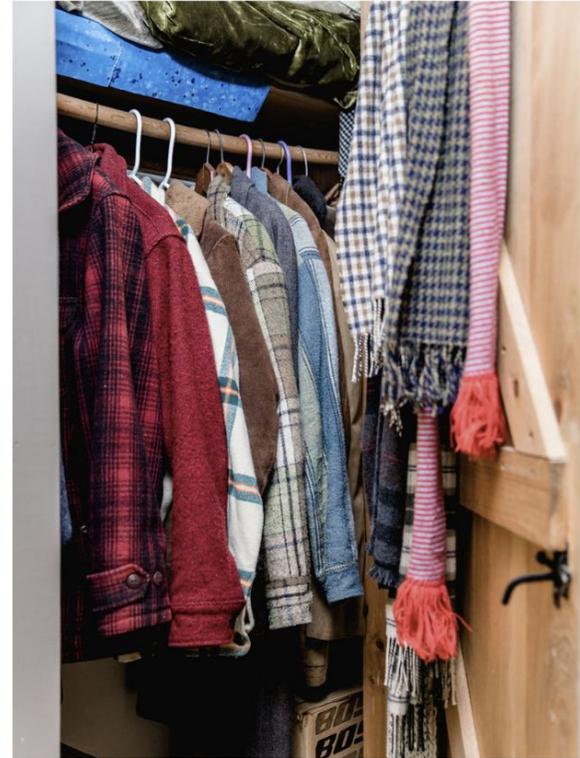
*"I think I'm a SAAB guy  
because my grandfather was  
a Volvo guy."*

*He would take my brother and I to look at SAABs in  
the 1970's and I always liked their design."*



**THE MAINERS:** The art in your home is enviable. How did you start collecting? Do you have any tips for the rest of us?

**DAN:** I firmly believe we should put things on our walls that we love. I think having original art acquired from someone we know adds another level to the enjoyment of the piece. I started collecting art as an undergrad— my 2-dimensional design professor had a studio sale in the South End of Boston and was selling many beautiful paintings for very reasonable prices to help fund her transition to Vermont. I purchased a small oil-on-silk that I loved and still love. I have bartered many times with artists whose art I love and respect and this has allowed me to obtain many of the works I have. I have also found a few original paintings at flea markets for reasonable prices and I picked up some antique oils at an estate auction I used to frequent in Massachusetts.



**THE MAINERS:** You have an entire closet of jackets. In fact, the first time I met you, you were ripping apart one of your long time favorites to use for your artwork. Tell us more about your closet of just jackets. Do you have a favorite? How did you acquire most of them?

**DAN:** I have a little obsession with vintage wool coats and vintage suede jackets. I'm not sure why. The ones I have and wear are very well made of materials and patterns I really admire and am inspired by. There is one red and black plaid wool coat that has a beautiful camel colored velvet-like lining. It's very heavy so I only wear it in very cold temperatures. If a coat or jacket has a beautiful label inside it is likely I'll be more interested in it. Some have names of previous owners written inside. Most of them are from thrift stores, but one used to be my father's. It's dark green corduroy with a soft plush light lemon-yellow and grey-green lining.

FIND DAN HERE:

<http://www.dandowd66.com>

Instagram: @dandowdart

*The Bowdoin Orient*  
November 16, 2018

## THE BOWDOIN ORIENT

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# Dan Dowd: security officer makes art from discarded materials

By [Sabrina Lin](#)

When Dan Dowd isn't working as a security guard at the Museum of Art, he's often creating art of his own at his home in Phippsburg.



**AMONG ARTISTS:** Museum security officer and assemblage artist Dan Dowd creates unique sculptures out of found objects and discarded waste, exploring the themes of recorded histories, temporality and materiality. Dowd moved to Maine in 2001 and has been at Bowdoin for 11 years.

Frequent visitors to the Bowdoin College Museum of Art recognize Dan Dowd as a familiar face. Over a decade long career as a museum security officer, his standing silhouette has become one with the pristine gallery walls, a guardian figure quietly watching over the collection. Yet there is a different kind of sparkle behind his glasses as Dowd speaks about making art of his own: uncovering the markings of time, material and narrative.

On his Instagram profile, Dowd summarizes himself as an “artist, rummager, conservationist, SAAB driver.” He is eloquent and soft-spoken, and perhaps a bit “earthy.” After a self-designed liberal arts study at Framingham State College, the Massachusetts native switched careers several times before moving to Maine in 2001.

“I graduated at a time when the economy was in really bad shape,” said Dowd. Companies were not hiring for creative offices, so he worked for seven years at a financial company in Massachusetts. “It was a fun social experience, but the job itself kind of bored me to death,” he said.

At the time, Maine, with a special connection to an influential art teacher from Dowd’s past, seemed like the next logical destination, offering new horizons in his career trajectory as well as art-making.

“I asked myself when I was at a chain or at a point in my career where I wasn’t sure what was next, where would I go if I retired? And I said, well, I’d go to Maine if I retired—so I did.”

He wasn’t quite sure where he was heading, but he held tightly onto art. During his early days in Phippsburg, Maine, Dowd took on restoring an 1880s Victorian House as a project. He continues to seek inspiration in found objects and discarded materials, juxtaposing and reimagining seemingly mundane objects.

“I’m interested in the recorded histories on materials,” he said. “I’m usually not drawn to using materials that are new and perfect. I’m interested in using the pieces that were worn out or stained or torn by the person that wore them.”

With his touch, aged pieces of rubber, fabric, metal and wood come together as assemblage sculptures, ingenious in their simple forms, bold colors and textured surfaces. Dowd salvages all his materials from a transfer station in Phippsburg, transforming a method of waste management into a tool for artistic reincarnation.

“There’s this attempt to keep things out of the landfill,” Dowd said. “There’s definitely an environmental spin to all of those piles and trailers at the transfer station too ... showing the life that has been recorded on the material, but also the life that remains with the material.”

Daniel Kany of the Portland Press Herald praises Dowd for his ability to “establish dignity in detritus.” Despite their humble sources, these assemblages harken back to a broader tradition in the history of art, full of subtlety, self-awareness and artistic sensibilities.

“I feel like I paint with material,” Dowd said. “I look at material and I think, where can I include this piece that will go well with that color and that Patina to create this object of history that will satisfy me?”

Humor acts as another powerful tool in Dowd’s oeuvre. His installation in 2011 at Fort Andross featured photographs of the head of former faculty member Anna Hepler against various backdrops on campus, accompanied by a monumental sculpture of Helper’s head, recreating the texture of her hair with faux-fur and fabric.

“I was interested in documenting her here, but not in a typical portrait way. So I asked her if she would let me photograph her head, because that was how I was sort of introduced to her [as having a great head of hair],” he said.

“I’m definitely interested in humor and quirkiness and letting people sort of make connections about things that don’t necessarily make sense. I’d like things to be a little bit absurd,” Dowd added.

Though he likes to consider his art as separate from his job, Dowd acknowledges the impact of being in such close proximity to the masterpieces of the collection. In 2012, he got to contribute to an exhibition at the museum by painting a reproduction of William Wegman’s work on the museum wall. Cognizant of viewers’ response to a work of art, he cites the Edward Hopper show in 2011 as a personal favorite.

“I have clear memories of standing in the Osher Gallery and looking at the pavilion stairs throughout the day. And then the stairs were never empty of people; it was either people coming in or going out the entire time. It was unheard of previous to that show,” said Dowd.

He is always looking to exchange ideas with members of the Bowdoin community, either about his own process or interpretations of ongoing installations. In fact, one of our first encounters took place when I was writing a paper in Boyd Gallery. Dowd’s friendship with faculty from the Departments of Visual Arts and Art History has inspired new levels of critical understanding.

“So when I was talking to [Professor of Art History Pamela] Fletcher, I was really interested in the sort of alternative label to give the visitor an alternative idea about what that piece of artwork could be about,” he said. “Just to show another angle, another side—I think it’s just broadening.”

For any artist, collaboration and creative exchange is central to their process; Dowd is no exception. He talks fondly of Maine’s greater artistic community, connected by the machinery of social media.

“I feel like there’s a lot of artists that are hidden in the cracks that no one even knows about,” Dowd said.

Towards the end of our chat, he confessed that he wasn’t used to talking about himself. We briefly stepped into the Boyd Gallery, where Dowd posed in front of an Anne Arnold sculpture in his usual position—still, silent and steadfast.

*Down East*  
September 2015

# Down East

## The Art Project

Using bright paint, antiques, and curiosities, sculptor Dan Dowd transforms an awkward building into a stylish home.



By Meadow Rue Merrill  
Photographed by Erin Little

[cs\_drop\_cap letter="S" color="#000000" size="5em" ]culptor Dan Dowd is known for turning found objects into art: his grandfather's duct-taped work gloves, wool sweaters wrapped with inner tubes, industrial tiles shaped into giant pinecones. But his largest project has been transforming a peculiar house on a giant chunk of rock deep in the Phippsburg woods into an imaginative studio and living space.

When Dowd purchased the tall 1970s home a little more than a decade ago, it had both shakes and clapboard siding, rustic barn doors, metal sliding windows, and a reverse layout with the bedrooms on the first floor and living areas above. "I guess the owners thought, 'We should have the view when our eyes are open,'" Dowd surmises.

The second-story outlook — over the pointy tops of pines to the dazzling waters of Atkins Bay, Popham Beach, Pond Island Light, and the hazy edge of the Atlantic beyond — is captivating. So are the brightly painted rooms, dark ceilings, old furniture, and collections with which Dowd has ornamented the interior.

Little of the house's original appearance remains. Dowd replaced the mishmash siding with galvanized roofing material, hung vertically to make the house appear even taller. He painted the first-floor entry bright white and filled it with art. The floor is galvanized sheet metal. The bedrooms are painted rich red, green, and yellow — including the ceilings. A downstairs bathroom features “fluid marble” cut into long tiles to reveal the stone's natural black and white striping. A worn table — built from a salvaged base and an old door — anchors his workshop, which is filled with piles of recycled materials and bathed in natural light.

The spicy-orange upstairs living space has an open floor plan, so Dowd added a lime-green accent wall to create a space to hang a friend's painting. He has decorated the room with mid-century and antique furnishings and a coffee table that he built from old iron and wooden truck pallets that belonged to his father, who was a truck driver. The kitchen cabinets get their gleam from Chinese joss paper that Dowd pasted over gold paint and brushed with amber varnish.

Dowd has been buying antiques since he was 19, when he earned money for college by working for a furniture refinisher in Franklin, Massachusetts. He often gives objects a quirky twist, like the black Napoleon collar on a bust of Caesar. He's also a landfill junkie who regularly drags home pieces for his work. “I try to restrict myself to no more than two times a week. I don't want to be greedy.”

Standing outside on a deck that overlooks wild huckleberry, wooded paths, and a raised reflecting pond built from lumber and a pond liner, Dowd says, “This seemed like a house that didn't know what it wanted to be. I helped it find out.”



*Dan Dowd has transformed a bland house into a colorful and whimsical home using art, antiques, and landfill finds.*

*The Bowdoin Orient*  
February 27, 2015

## THE BOWDOIN ORIENT

# Dowd finds inspiration in art he protects

**BRIDGET WENT**  
ORIENT STAFF

For Bowdoin College Museum of Art (BCMA) security guard Dan Dowd, guarding the museum's collection is more than just a nine-to-five job; it's brain food for his own creative aspirations.

A Mass. native, Dowd moved to Maine in 2001 to pursue art. In 2007, he joined Bowdoin's new security staff after the BCMA reopened following its renovation.

After taking studio art and art history courses during his undergraduate years at [Framingham State University](#) and immersing himself in a project to renovate a 19th century home, Dowd discovered his passion for found materials and objects since moving to Maine.

"I'm really interested in objects—why they were made, how they were used, how long they were used, and ultimately why they were discarded," said Dowd.

Dowd draws inspiration from his local transfer station—where waste is deposited—collecting materials, fibers and random objects to use as fodder for his work.



“Documentation of items, events, people and places is the driving force behind my found object and installation work,” Dowd writes in his artist statement.

[His work](#) aims to highlight parallels between the lives of humans and the lives of objects.

Dowd analogized the “patinas that objects develop and [the] wrinkles that humans develop and how people change through their lives.”

According to Dowd, patinas—the thin layer, such as rust oxidization, that materials acquire over time—may convey a variety of emotions, from comedy to tragedy to drama. His goal in rescuing these forgotten items and giving them a “second chance” is to depict and show the beauty and history of items that wouldn’t normally be praised for their aesthetic value.

In addition to his current Gallery Framing exhibition on Pleasant Street, Dowd has been showcasing his artwork predominantly across the Northeast for over 10 years. Past solo exhibitions of his include "[Anna Hepler's Head](#)" at the Coleman Burke Gallery in Brunswick and "[Born Again](#)" at the University of Southern Maine in Portland. He has also been featured in several group exhibitions.

As a museum security guard, Dowd is constantly exposed to new artwork, which continuously gives him new ideas.

“I’m certainly influenced by the works on the walls,” Dowd said. “As soon as new work goes on the walls, I can’t wait to eat it up and find out about it.”

Dowd said he is particularly excited to see new pieces from the museum’s upcoming exhibit: "[PAST FUTURES: Science Fiction, Space Travel, and Postwar Art of the Americas](#).”

According to Dowd, the best part of his job is meeting people and learning about new artists. As far as aspirations for the future, Dowd hopes to continue showcasing his work in the community.

Dowd’s work will be included in [Art in the Park](#) in Worcester, MA, this summer, in addition to a solo installation at the [Masonic Temple in Portland](#) this July.

“I would love to eventually be affiliated with and be represented by a gallery,” Dowd said. “My ultimate goal is to be a working artist that survives solely through my artwork.”

Dowd’s work is [on display through Saturday](#) at the Gallery Framing in Brunswick as part of the “Paired Devices” exhibition—a gathering of the work of five mid-coast Maine artists surrounding tools, hardware and everyday objects.