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13th STATE

ART + TEXT

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Goodbye to rabbit season

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Detail of *Pushing*, acrylic on canvas by Shari Weschler. All install pics by Castro.

Some things rabbits do: Run. Multiply.
Burrow.

They are also known to inhabit the paintings of Shari Weschler, or Sumo Bunki as she's long been branded online. Her rabbits belong less to a cutesy or representational tradition and more to the psyche's interiors. Visiting her New

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gallery, I asked Weschler if she's ever had a pet rabbit.

She grinned. As a kid her parents bred dachshunds. A house full of dogs. Litter after litter born before her eyes.

Currently, she loves her cat. But rabbits? No. She's never had a pet rabbit.

Nevertheless, the rabbit is something like a familiar in Weschler's art, and so the cunicular presence animates her final outing as a Newport gallerist. Her Coastal Contemporary Gallery will shutter its Thames Street location on April 29, making the final show's title of *Taking Flight* quite literal.

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Writing on the walls and one of Weschler's photos, *Halloween*
Crows Thames

It's not uncommon for Rhode Island galleries to take a fatal tumble during their toddler years. Based on my eight years reporting in the state: many don't survive past age six, especially commercial ones. Eulogy and witness is often the best a writer can do for these lost spaces. Venues come and go, but records are generally easy to keep.

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Well, until the record keepers also close shop. The first article I wrote about CCG in 2018 was also my last article for the Newport Mercury in its weekly print edition. To write from one ending to another is to span something, right? But what's distance without substance gained? I want to circle back, but I don't want to repeat myself either.

The show's outlier might be a good starting point to discuss something new. Joining Weschler for the gallery's sendoff is exhibiting artist Deena Smith. She doesn't live in New England, or even on this coast, but she and Weschler began a friendship via Instagram during the pandemic. Smith's works here are digital collages composed from Weschler's Instagram posts.

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An artist statement accompanying Smith's work is worth reading for further explanation of the penpal friendship. There's a tone of gratitude that points to part of what made Weschler a popular gallerist: her talent for activating others' creative pursuits. "A true teacher," Smith writes, adding that her contributions are meant to "compliment" Weschler's own.

My favorite by Smith is called *Unearthing Secrets*, a title suggestive of the entire show's contents. Weschler's own work here is revelatory, and not exactly sweet. There are photos of the gallery's history, like exhibit installs, but these serve more of a documentary role than a celebratory one. The show is very much a collection of endings. The divorce that ended Weschler's 30-year marriage is a major theme here, alchemized into the necessary elements

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(or maybe medicines) of fire, shadow and light. Photos of birds in flight, a summer bonfire, and a tiger-masked selfie evince pivotal inner moments without being explicit.



Tiger 1 and *Abstraction No. 6*, both iPhone photos by Weschler, return after their first appearance in *Bunni 2020*

Autobiography can complicate artworks for the viewer, with unclarity and vanity two possible pitfalls. Thankfully, this sendoff serves pleasing visuals even without background info on Weschler:

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Messages scrawled in pencil on the walls, as if left in haste. Photos sans frames, cuz, as Weschler notes, they're expensive. And that's sound rationale, considering she chose mostly photographs for her goodbyes, along with a few paintings.

There's some overlap with the show *Bunni 2020*, Weschler's first solo show at CCG, which was spurred by pandemic limitations. Looking at the images for that show, like the adorably disturbing *Rabbit Holding*, the work in *Taking Flight* is overall less turbulent. The mood here isn't funerary, but conclusive. Plenty of white space on the walls and photos printed with generous margins maintain an atmosphere of spaciousness and, perhaps, relief.

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Only one of the finale's paintings represents Weschler's most recognized style. It's called *Little Red* and fuses wolf and woman. I guess you'd call it anthropomorphic figuration. Zoomers might call 'em furrries, albeit super elegant ones. And Weschler dubs them "Circus Freaks." None of those terms quite describe the painterly technique involved: acrylics mixed and layered so effectively that they resemble the lush transparency of oil paint. Not a rarity for an acrylic painter, but certainly the mark of a studious one.

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Deena Smith, *Unearthing Secrets*.

Paintings like *Little Red* sell, Weschler says. But they are technically demanding, insofar as an expected result calls for a more standard process. Now salability doesn't imply any relationship to quality, positive or negative, but you might appreciate Weschler's finding a way around a common stylistic im

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how do you maneuver around the thing for which you're known?

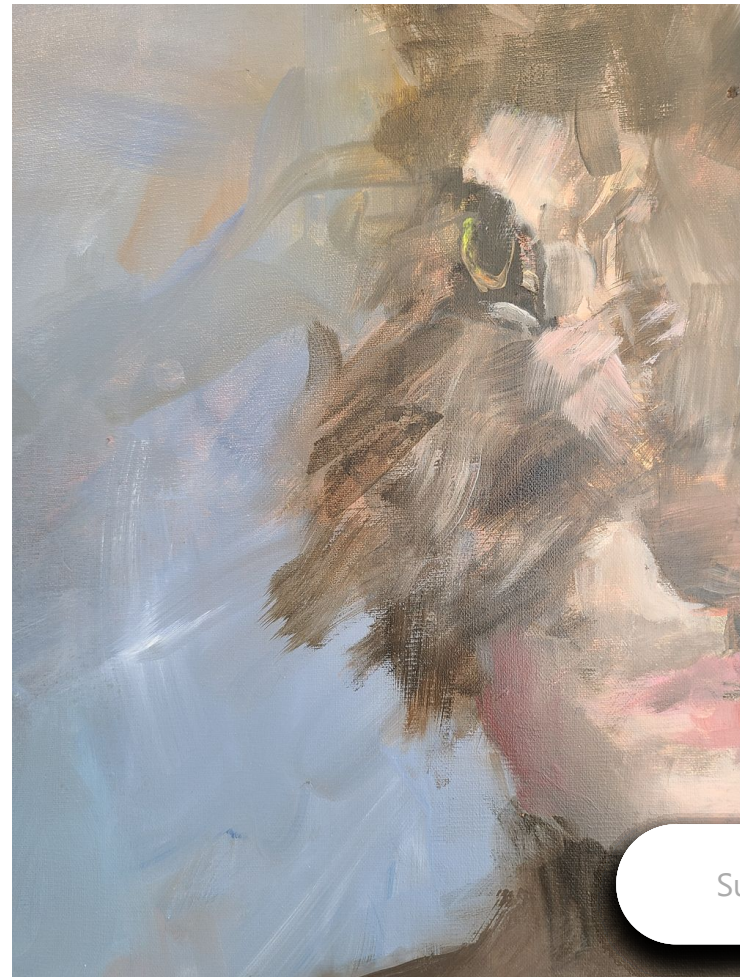
One example is *She Drifted*, which Weschler explains was painted after a gratuitously vivid dream. Here, instead of a sheeny surface, we get nearly opaque clouds of color surrounding the bust of a bunny-masked woman. The resolute smoothness of Weschler's style has been peeled back. I've never seen her brushwork like this: not only confident but obvious. The mask in particular appears to be effortless, quick strokes, but one asset of mastery is its own concealment.

So why include *Little Red* when it seems Weschler is moving toward something else? The painting represents another significant player in her personal



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cosmology, Weschler says, “a person who unknowingly caused a ripple effect, opening a portal.” Weschler ran through it—and on the other side? Life after divorce. For Weschler, that meant liberation.



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Closeup of *She Drifted*, acrylic on canvas

Good thing I followed that up in an email—I had mistaken the wolf to be an adversarial figure. On my way out the door, I half-glimpsed Weschler sitting at her desk, *Little Red* overhead. Not a bad omen after all. Nor was my stepping outside the gallery. The day of my visit had begun in rainy grayness, but the sun was out by the time I left the gallery—probably for the last time, I later realized. Exiting the gallery closed a narrative, knotted a loop. Not that any of this was on my mind then. Instead I focused on the now useless umbrella in my hand, wondering the best way to hold it.

I covered CCG more times than I can remember, but post-pandemic and pre-blog, I fell off. Call it a regret, as it is good to see galleries before they

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disappear. There's still some time left to see *Taking Flight*, a tonic assortment of art and text to commemorate four years of effort. And it contains at least one spectacular painting, *Pushing*, a canvas as agitated as it is gentle. In it, a bunny seemingly melts into its background. There's a calm palette, with a shifting form that gushes uncertainty.

What else can I say about a rabbit in the grass? Desperate to avoid that repetition I mentioned earlier, I turned to the most relevant title on my bookshelf—*The Leaping Hare* by George Ewart Evans and David Thomson (1972). They write: “A hare squatting on its form, or immobile in the stubble, is nearly indistinguishable from its background as it is possible.”

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An apt description of *Pushing*, but also an invitation to tumble down—you guessed it—a rabbit hole of zoology. Rabbits and hares are pretty much the same thing, right? Yes, they've been through their taxonomical growing pains, having at one point been rodents until their incisors warranted a separate order: Lagomorpha, or literally 'hare forms' in Ancient Greek. But even among hares and rabbits there are deep divisions.

For one, hares have never been domesticated. They are solitary mammals, whereas rabbits are infamously social and fertile. Hare babies are born agile and with open eyes, while lil' rabbits are tender and need to be nursed. Rabbits are also excellent specimens for genetic research, but it's hard to imagine wild hares being so compliant. The hare's disinterest in

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humans is so noted that Evans and Thomson set out to catalog all the popular beliefs and superstitions about the animal in their aforementioned book.

So how do you tell a rabbit from a hare? It's not foolproof, but the ears often give it away. Longer ears? There's your hare.

The bunny entity in *She Drifted* has elongated ears. So is Weschler still a "bunni" rabbit? Judging by these ears, I'm not sure.

Like the rabbit in *Pushing*, whose form I'm still trying to decipher, Weschler's recent life developments have made her paintings conundrums. They have loosened restraint without sacrificing mystery. They're desiring, reaching, spilling out. Whatever transformation

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comes next, some rabbit will surely attend.

Or will it be a hare?

Some things hares do: Run. Leap. Escape.

FYI

Taking Flight, an exhibit by Shari Weschler and Deena Smith, is on view through Friday, April 29, 2022. The show is open for another 4 days, 5 hours.

A closing party is scheduled for this Friday, April 22, at 5 pm.

You can see it at Coastal Contemporary Gallery, 491 Th...

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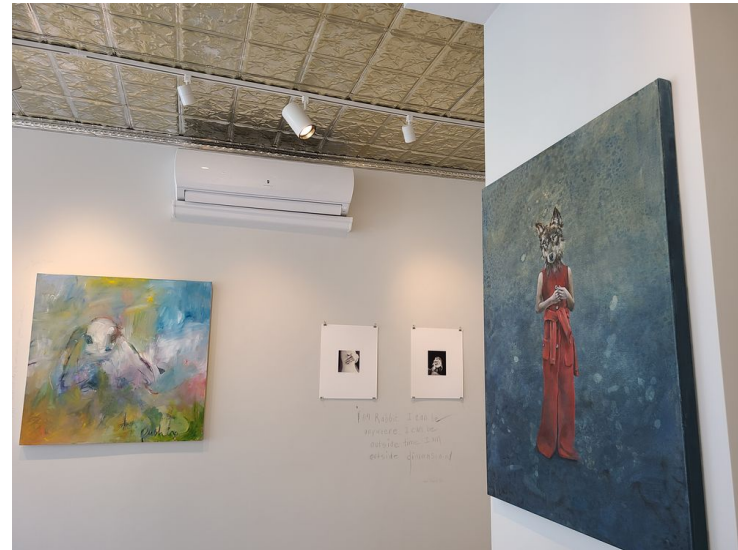
Street, Newport, RI.

[\(Google maps\)](#)

[\(Gallery info\)](#)

(Shari Weschler's [website](#) and [insta](#))

(Deena Smith's [website](#) and [insta](#))

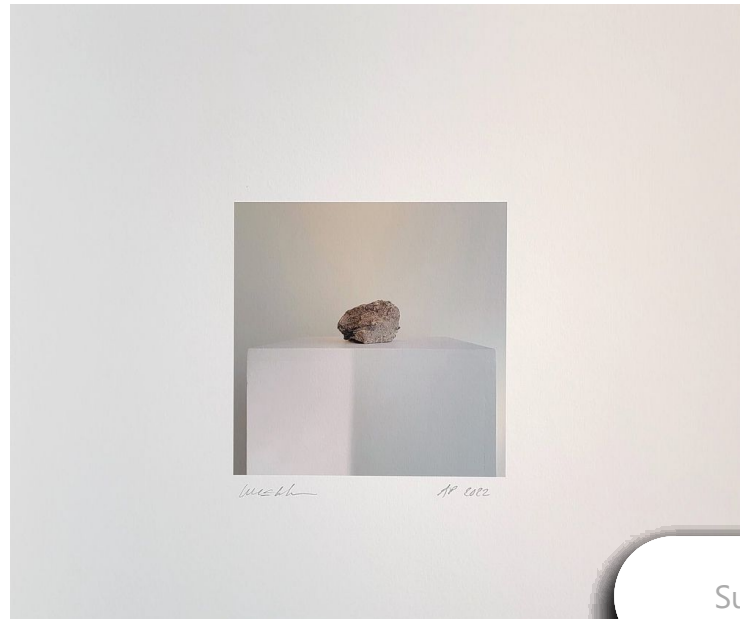


Two paintings: *Pushing* (left) and *Little Red* (right)

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Extreme closeup of *Pushing*: an errant bit of brown



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Weschler's *Pedestal Stone*, a photo of the gallery's resident rock/doorstop.



CCG's unofficial canine mascots by artist Will Kurtz: a mainstay of the gallery until the end



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