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Living with Lyme disease, a Brunswick artist saves his energy for his art

James Graham is often tired and riddled with pain, and expresses his frustrations and joy in gestural, abstract paintings.

BY **BOB KEYES** STAFF WRITER



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James Graham in his Brunswick studio. *Staff photo by Ben McCanna*

BRUNSWICK — James Graham fell asleep while driving. He made it home safely and attributed the episode to heat stroke or something similar.

He had been working construction in St. Paul and felt exhausted and overcome while commuting home to rural Minnesota on a hot summer day in

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haven't recovered since.”



“Bunganuc Series No. 19” by James Graham. *Photo courtesy of the artist*

The original diagnosis was meningitis. Several years later doctors told him he had Lyme disease. By then, it had taken over his body, leaving him listless and always sleepy, occasionally immobile and beset by near-constant pain and what he calls “brain fog that can be debilitating.”

He expresses his frustration over his physical condition in his painting studio in Brunswick, a converted boat garage on Maquoit Bay. Graham, 49, has lived in Maine since 2015, coming east to settle on land that has been occupied by his wife’s family for generations.

A South Dakotan by birth, Graham makes large, wildly colorful and gestural abstract paintings, using a combination of oils, aerosols and house

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Over that time, Graham has developed a loose abstract expressionist style that relies on the immediate energy and language of the paint's color and texture and how it lies in layers on the canvas. It takes all his energy and clear-mindedness to work a few hours every day.

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“It’s a lot of work because you can make a gesture, but to make a gesture feel like it is fresh and active, it takes practice,” he said, standing before a canvas nearly as tall as he is that is propped against the wall of his studio. “This is a mash-up of ideology and letting go of your consciousness while maintaining your consciousness, because you have to know quite a bit about painting to do it. There are thousands of decisions to be made.”

His paintings evoke the natural landscape around him – the colors of the leaves on the trees in the fall, the hayfields, the cold winter sun. In an abstract way, they reference the plains of South Dakota and the environment of coastal Maine. On his canvases, he layers references to politics, social upheaval and the landscape, presented in his abstracted and refracted view of the world.

His paintings feel fully charged and physically active, and embedded with pain, sorrow, cathartic release and joy.

Graham has had one solo exhibition since

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South Dakota. His paintings are in the collections of three university museums in South Dakota, and he won several grants from state and regional arts agencies in both states.



"Heightened Distrust of Verbage" by James Graham. *Staff photo by Ben McCanna*

He came east for love. He met Tilly Laskey, a Mainer, while she was working at a museum in South Dakota. She hung one of his shows, back in 2001.

They married last year on Laskey's family land on Bunganuc Road in Brunswick. Laskey works as outreach curator at the Maine Historical Society.

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Painting in Maine is different because Maine is a very different place compared to north-central South Dakota, where Graham grew up. "Trees

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And the ocean, for another. He goes to his studio most days, using a walking stick to help him on the grassy path from the house where he and Laskey live. The studio is an active place, strewn with open tubes and cans of paint, countless jars of brushes and canvases stacked one against the other along the walls. Maquoit Bay is a short walk, out of sight, but its sounds and smells are ever present.

While living in South Dakota, before he got sick, Graham supported his art by working at a powerhouse AM radio station in Yankton, hosting a late-night country music program and another show geared toward truck drivers. He was good at radio, and the station moved him to the morning slot on FM.

That's when radio stopped being fun. "My job became more of a career, and it started to affect my art," he said.



The work surfaces in James Graham's studio in Brunswick are every bit as colorful as his paintings. *Staff photo by Ben McCanna*

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stayed home and became isolated for long stretches. That contributed to depression and bouts of anxiety. Moving to Maine meant rebuilding his life and career.

Graham's entry into art came through comic books. He didn't have any formal art training growing up, but he always drew and enjoyed drawing comic books and doing illustration work. An early influence and mentor was a comic-book creator named Rocky Hartberg, who also owned a comic book store in a mall in Aberdeen, South Dakota. "He showed me a few tricks, but mostly he showed me that if you love something enough, you can do it," Graham said. "I realized that being an artist was possible because of him."

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His first exposure to fine art came during high school when he attended a Future Problem Solving program at the University of Michigan. While visiting the art museum there, he saw paintings by Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst and others and spent hours engrossed in the paint. Inspired, he studied painting and humanities in college, graduating from the University of South Dakota in 1993. He cites many influences: Picasso, Arshile Gorky, Per Kirkebe, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and native artists Arthur Amiotte and Robert Penn.

But the big one is Marc Chagall, "who blew me away – the colors and the character and the



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art and believes ne s created an environment in
Maine that will help him do so. He’s happy in life,
inspired by place and regaining his strength.

Slowly, the fog is lifting.

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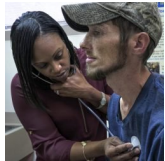
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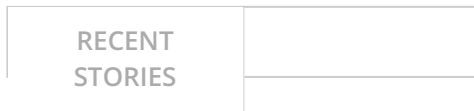
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