

SPOTLIGHT

By Cynthia Close

Anna Dibble: Answering Nature's Call

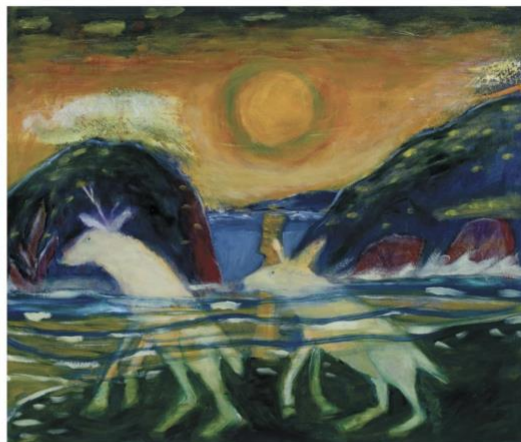
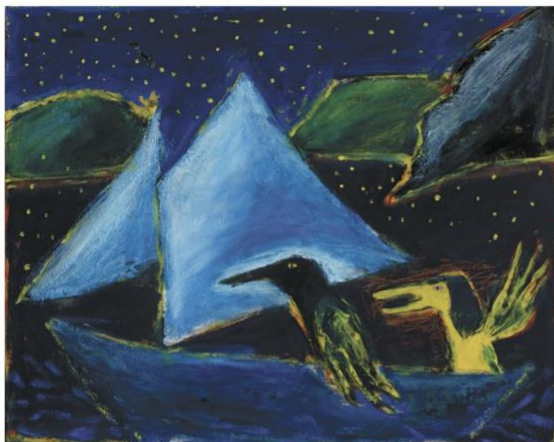
I want to be surprised. Every painting's gotta have that element of surprise. —Anna Dibble



Fearlessness is a required character trait for anyone who pursues a career and a life as an artist. As a ten-year-old whose curiosity led her to climb inside a beaver den to see what it was all about, Anna Dibble exhibited that kind of fearlessness. This event was also evidence of a deep interest in the natural world and an awareness of the creatures that inhabited that world which now has infiltrated Dibble's choice of subject matter. Decades since exploring that beaver's domain, this quintessential New England artist and native Vermonter now has the time and energy to devote herself full-time to painting in her Maine studio.

The oldest of four children born into a creative family in rural Vermont, Dibble attended a one room schoolhouse. In those days kids were expected to entertain themselves, roaming around outside most of the time, unsupervised, usually only coming home to eat and sleep. This sense of freedom in nature that Dibble experienced also honed her observational skills and her intuitive approach to decision making. Although she studied art at various times at Parsons, The New School, The Boston Museum School, Vermont Studio Center and Pittsburgh Art Institute, she identifies as a "self-taught" artist, a description that she prefers rather than naïve, or outsider, which at a cursory glance is where her deceptively innocent, almost child-like depictions of critters and figures flitting about in the wild might seem to fit.

During an interview in May 2025 with this writer, Dibble modestly confessed, "I'm a college dropout. I couldn't deal with school." Dibble's independent approach, avoiding the trappings of academic degrees and other honorifics reflects a generational pattern. She comes from a family of self-taught, yet successful, professional artists. Her father, Thomas Reilly Dibble, was a painter



who studied at the Art Students League and also ran a picture framing shop. Her grandfather was a cartoonist and landscape painter. Besides birthing and raising four children, her mother was a pianist, which contributed to Dibble's ability to read and write music. It was after WWII and her parents were living in New York City where they surrounded themselves with a rich coterie of creative artists, musicians and writers. After they moved to Vermont seeking a better environment to raise a family they continued to host their creative city friends like sculptor Lothar Wuerslin, printmaker/sculptor George Nama, and painter Paul Stopforth, all of whom had an influence on the young Dibble.

Dibble's innate creativity extended into the fields of writing, set design and music. When she was in her 20s, she made her living writing, drawing cartoons and doing paste-up for a local newspaper, *The Manchester Journal*. At the age of 29 she found herself in California. While there she connected with a guy who was involved with the burgeoning field of animation. Dibble managed to find jobs with some of the best commercial and independent animators of the day working for Disney, Marvel, Hanna Barbera, Murakami-Wolf and others. This was in a time when animation was very much a labor intensive, hands-on endeavor. She also completed ventures in music composition and set design for the Children's Television Workshop, the creators of *Sesame Street*.

In 2018 Dibble founded and directed a multi-year collaborative public art/ocean science initiative: *The Gulf of Maine Ecology Arts Project*, focusing on the changes in biodiversity in the Gulf due to climate change and human impact. The central piece was a massive sculpture installation featuring an artist-student-built right whale and other endangered marine animals made from recycled, re-purposed materials. The project culminated in two exhibitions, the first in 2021 at Bigelow Laboratory of Ocean Science, Boothbay, Maine, and lastly, *SeaChange: Darkness & Light in the Gulf of Maine* at Maine Maritime Museum in Bath, ending in January 2024. The project was an all-consuming endeavor directly related to themes that are central to Dibble's painting.

With that large public facing project behind her Dibble explains, "Now is the best time of life... I live in a small house near Portland, ME, and can focus full-time on my art." Although her experience of the natural world fuels her work, she says, "I'm a studio painter. I don't paint *en plein air*. It comes out of my head. I go up to the studio about 9 am and paint for several hours. I work on gessoed wood panels, and I'll start at a time. I do a lot of drawing. The painting process involves a lot of layering... Images evolve intuitively. My landscapes tell stories."

Although relatively modest in size, Dibble's

Above: *Such Stuff as Dreams are Made On*, 2024, oil on panel, 16 x 20". *Golden Slumbers*, 2024, oil on panel, 20 x 24". Below: *Of the Shadows Deep*, 2023, oil on panel, 30 x 40". Opposite, from top: A portrait of Anna Dibble in her studio in North Freeport, ME. Photo: Winky Lewis. *Natural Forces*, 2024, oil on panel, 16 x 20". Artworks courtesy of the artist.

landscape stories pack a punch. Their energy is reminiscent of another independently-minded New England painter and essayist, Marsden Hartley (1877–1943). Powerful color contrasts, flattened forms pushing forward in robust compositions along with whimsical figures battling the elements, are frequently found when surveying Dibble's work. Humans and animals share boats navigating rough blue seas as violent red and yellow rain pummels them. Dibble is one of those rare painters to take on the challenge of capturing the mystery of night and succeeding. Her whimsy is enmeshed in dread.

Anna Dibble's paintings have been featured in solo, group, and invitational exhibitions in museums, cultural centers, and galleries throughout New England and New York for over forty years. Summer 2025 was also a busy one for Dibble. The Cynthia Winings Gallery in Blue Hill, Maine has represented Dibble's work for nine years and hosted a solo exhibition for Dibble this summer. Dibble enjoyed a joint show of her paintings with artist Katherine Bradford at the Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland.

Cynthia Close is contributing editor for Documentary Magazine and writes regularly for Art New England and several other publications.

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