

MEREDITH WARD FINE ART

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Meredith Ward Fine Art

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STORYTELLING: FRANK DIAZ ESCALET IN MAINE
June 22 – July 28, 2023



Moby Dick, 1977, cut leather on masonite, 18 x 24 in.

Meredith Ward Fine Art is pleased to present **Storytelling: Frank Diaz Escalet in Maine**, an exhibition of twelve inlaid cut leather works and paintings on view from June 22 through July 28, 2023. Puerto Rican-born Frank Diaz Escalet (1930-2012) lived and worked on the coast of Maine from the 1970s until his death. The third exhibition of the self-taught artist's work at Meredith Ward Fine Art, this show highlights his dynamic imagery created from pieced-together cut leather, a technique he developed after moving to Downeast Maine.

Created during Escalet's first decade and a half in Maine, these works draw on memories, personal experiences, and the lives of those around him. His newly established art practice of inlaid cut leather, which flourished after several years of hardship as a newcomer to Eastport, found its basis in storytelling. "I always portray life, the storytelling of people," Escalet noted. Through snapshot-like compositions in saturated, clean-cut leather, Escalet's scenes are charged with intrigue, excitement, and humor. His works place the viewer in the midst of romantic trysts, among the daily toils and leisure of the working class, and within dramatic literary moments. In *Moby Dick* (1977), the head of the white whale overwhelms the composition, its menacing jaw on the verge of engulfing Ahab's tiny ship.

Speaking about Washington County, Escalet remarked, "I got taken in by the beauty, I mean, it was nature in the raw, it was really fantastically beautiful up there." Despite the beauty of their new surroundings, these were tough years for the Escalets. They opened a leather goods shop called

(more)



Shine Mister?, 1980, cut leather on masonite, 24 x 18 in.

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Pandora's Box and, for extra income, Escalet taught leathercraft to the native Passamaquoddy people through a government program. Spurred through isolation and adversity, Escalet began making his inlaid leather compositions in 1974. While he felt apart from his new community, Escalet shared a determined work ethic with the traditional Maine laborer, often working fervently until a piece was complete. In works such as *Fish* (1978), he alludes to his family's humble circumstances while playfully animating a simple Maine meal through the wide eyes and knowing grins of the laid-out fish. Escalet found an outlet for joy and hope through his tales in leather and paint, becoming a storyteller during his early years in Maine.

Born in Puerto Rico, Escalet grew up in a poor, immigrant family in New York City. He dropped out of school after eighth grade to help support his family, and served in the Air Force in the 1940s and 1950s. Back in New York, Escalet worked in a gas station, and learned metalworking from a customer. He opened a leather shop in Greenwich Village called The House of Escalet, and by the early 1960s, he had developed a celebrity clientele, designing and creating leather garments for Sly and the Family Stone, The Rolling Stones, Gary Puckett and the Union Gap, and Aretha Franklin. In 1971, Escalet moved his family to Eastport, Maine, where, after several years of struggling to make a living, he began making his inlaid leather compositions. Escalet lived in Eastport for eleven years until moving to Kennebunkport where he reestablished The House of Escalet as a gallery and studio. He began painting consistently in the mid-1980s and started working in sculpture using found metal pieces scavenged from building sites in the late-1980s.

In 1988, Escalet was featured on *La Plaza*, a PBS program targeted to Latin Americans, which brought him to the attention of curators around the country. He began exhibiting widely through multiple one-person and group shows at colleges and universities in the 1990s. In a 1996 interview with *The Boston Globe*, he acknowledged the perseverance required to gain this recognition: "I have quite a track record as far as achieving things, although it wasn't quite mapped out for me. The road wasn't even paved." Escalet's work has been

placed in important private collections around the country and is represented in the collection of Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine.

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue, available in print and online.

About the Gallery

Meredith Ward Fine Art opened in 2004 specializing in American art from the 19th century to the present. The gallery is the exclusive representative of the estates of Flora Crockett, Joseph Fiore, and Steve Wheeler. Meredith Ward Fine Art is located at 44 East 74th Street, Suite G, in New York City and is currently open Monday through Friday, 10am to 5pm. For more information or images, contact Meghan Schwab at 212-744-7306 or info@meredithwardfineart.com.

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Fish, 1978, cut leather on masonite, 24 x 32 in.