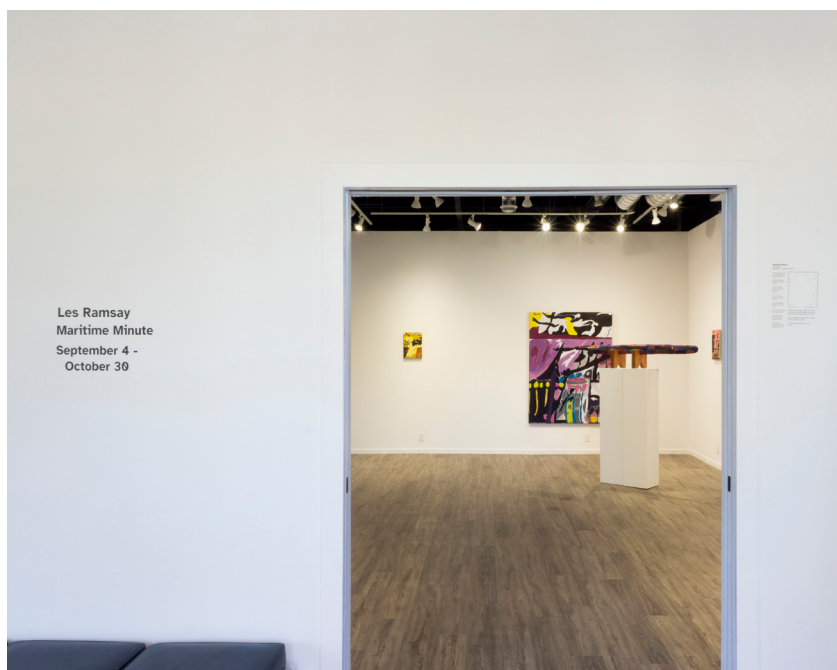


**“All the fish you never thought
would exist”¹**

On Les Ramsay’s
Maritime Minute

September 4 - October 30, 2025

Text by Jessica Joyce



Top image: Les Ramsay. Installation shot, *Maritime Minute*, Forest City Gallery. 2025. Photo by Dickson Bou.

Bottom image: Les Ramsay, *Salvation Mountain*, 2016. needlepoint in artists' frame. Photo by Dickson Bou.

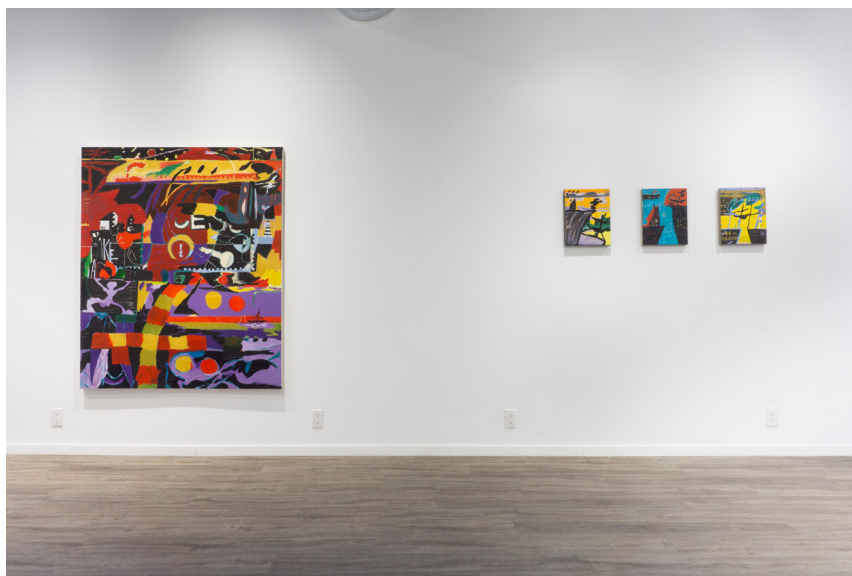
Les Ramsay is a painter. And a sculptor, and a quilter, and a needlepoint-maker. On a Zoom call in late August, he described the processes of collection and creation behind the artworks included in *Maritime Minute*. Trips to the thrift store, walks on coastal beaches, and a past visit to the American Folk Art Museum in New York City were necessary to gather the materials and references for the works on exhibition in London, Ontario.

Salvation Mountain (2016), the little artwork greeting viewers immediately to the left of the exhibition's entrance at Forest City Gallery, is Ramsay's first-ever needlepoint. Inspired by a fascination with needlepoint replicas of paintings usually seen in art history books and a trip to Joshua Tree, *Salvation Mountain* is a good example of the way that Ramsay recombines motifs and references from a diverse array of sources. It borrows from the visual language of cubist paintings: the beer bottle and cocktail glass in the bottom left corner; desert landscapes: the picturesque sunset at the top of the image and the saguaro cactus on the bottom edge; and its namesake, a California folk art landmark painted with joyful colours echoed in the blue and white stripes flowing diagonally across the needlepoint. Being the first he ever made, it is charmingly playful, and it makes visible the process of learning a new skill. Although it may be perceived as a surreal landscape, it might be better understood as a kind of pictorial sampler. In fibre arts, a sampler is a small artwork that demonstrates different techniques with threads

of varying colour and weight. Needlepoint samplers often include the alphabet whereas embroidery samplers show specific stitches and knots. They are highly collectable and there is a gorgeous wall of samplers on display at the Met, for example. Unlike Ramsay's more recent needlepoints, which are often crisp replicas of his own paintings, this one has gaps between stitches that show the fabric and wobbly edges that reveal the time and effort of the craft.

Viewers usually only see an artwork when it is finished, so they do not have the chance to enjoy what Ramsay calls "the satisfaction of the completed image" in the same way that artists do. He describes the small paintings in the show as being inspired by David Milne and studies by the Group of Seven but clarifies that his paintings are not studies, that each should be considered as a resolved artwork. What I first noticed about them was their shared iconography of the home, the cliff, and the scrubby pine. The repetition of these motifs implies a narrative: something about comfort, precariousness, and holding on. But they are not sequential; they cannot be read like a graphic novel or a comic strip. I think they are more like repeated attempts at deciphering the same story, as if Ramsay is trying to understand a different element or angle through each iteration.

The hard candy sunset of *Dusty Ditch at Dusk* (2024) caught my eye for its contrast between punchy colours and bold black outlines. When I asked about the pine hanging onto the cliff, Ramsay said that both it and the house in the image are windswept, like they could soon be knocked over by an incoming tornado, or they may have just survived one passing by. The



Les Ramsay. Installation shot, *Maritime Minute*, Forest City Gallery. 2025. Photo by Dickson Bou.



Les Ramsay. Left to right: *Dusty Ditch at Dusk* (2024), *I Know a Spot* (2024), *Maritime Minute* (2024). *Maritime Minute*, Forest City Gallery. 2025. Photo by Dickson Bou.

sunset could be the precursor or the aftermath of a storm. The little house is trapped between the before and after, with its cozy chimney chugging out cartoon puffs of smoke. Whereas the image may be complete, the story isn't.

As objects, the paintings are imbued with intention through their material construction, specifically in the choice of different upholstery fabrics for the painting surfaces in lieu of conventional canvas or linen. The unpainted edge of *Decadent Dusk* (2025), for example, reveals its plain-woven upholstery with a heathered grey warp and a cream coloured weft, creating an almost checkered frame that beautifully complements the hot pink and black composition. It recalls Mary Heilmann's assertion about paintings that "first, they're objects, and then they're pictures of something."²

The artwork most recognizable as an 'object,' *Subterranean Oracle* (2022), lurks in the back corner of the gallery as if in suspended animation. It is a sculpture of a fish, almost as long as I am tall. Made from driftwood coated in a mixture of beach sand folded into acrylic paint until it forms a concrete-like substance in hues that recall 90's windbreakers, the fish is displayed on two carved cedar supports that seem to give it legs. Embedded in its sandy flesh are pompoms and four multicoloured letter beads that spell out 'HELP.' Ramsay attributes his interest in building fish sculptures to a visit to the American Folk Art Museum during which he saw a sculpture simply titled, "Snake," described by him as consisting of "a twig painted black with two dots for eyes."



Les Ramsay. Installation shot, *Maritime Minute*, Forest City Gallery.
Left: *Tempest Rose* (2025), Right: *Subterranean Oracle* (2022). Photo
by Dickson Bou.

This encounter sparked an interest in hand painted decoy fish that eventually led him to collect fish-shaped pieces of driftwood during beach walks on the west coast.

Subterranean Oracle's cry for help alludes to Ramsay's ecological concerns in a similarly subtle way as the tiny industrial smokestacks in the background of one of the larger paintings, *Keys to Success* (2024). Quiet but pleading, it asks to be taken seriously despite its toy-like appearance. It is one of many that Ramsay talks about as belonging to an imaginary ecosystem of mutant fish deep underwater that may have evolved to survive exposure to pollution. Although playful and verging on the absurd, the fish invokes an empathetic response that prompts viewers to think about how they could possibly help this creature. Should it be returned to the water? Given that acrylic paint is a form of plastic, that would mean contributing more pollution to the beach. Should it be put into an aquarium? It would surely deteriorate. So, what does it want from us? Only Ramsay knows for sure, but I think that stopping by the gallery for a visit would be a good start.



Les Ramsay. Installation shot, Maritime Minute, Forest City Gallery. 2025. Photo by Dickson Bou.

Endnotes

1] Les Ramsay described his fish sculptures in this way during our Zoom call about the exhibition on August 27th, 2025.

2] Mary Heilmann, "Fantasy," Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 5, October 14, 2009, 12 min., 54 sec., <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s5/mary-heilmann-in-fantasy-segment/>.

Bios & Acknowledgements

Les Ramsay Les Ramsay is a visual artist based in Vancouver, on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. Working across painting, sculpture, and textiles, his practice blends abstraction with craft traditions, using bold colour, found materials, and layered textures to explore the relationship between art, design, and everyday objects. Ramsay holds a BFA from Emily Carr University and an MFA from Concordia university 2014, and has exhibited in Canada and internationally.

Jessica Joyce Jessica Irene Joyce (she/her) is an artist in a long-term relationship with painting. Created with salvaged, traded, and repurposed materials, her paintings suggest a gentle path to reciprocity between artist and environment. Jessica holds a BFA in Studio Arts with a specialization in painting from Concordia University and an MFA in Visual Arts from Western University. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Art and Visual Culture at Western University. Her paintings have been exhibited in Montreal, St. John's, and throughout Southwestern Ontario. Jessica is a contributing editor for Embassy Cultural House in London, Ontario.



Forest City Gallery (FCG) is an artist-run centre founded on artistic autonomy with a commitment to excellence in programming exhibitions and events that reflect and address recent developments in cultural production. FCG serves to foster and support contemporary art, promoting dialogue among local, regional, and international arts communities. FCG represents artists of all disciplines and career levels with a focus on emerging artists and practices.

FCG's programs and exhibitions are free and accessible to all thanks to the generous support of the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, London Arts Council, and the London Community Foundation.

We are grateful to our artists, members, volunteers, donors, and community partners. Our operations rely on your generous and dedicated support.

Please consider becoming a member of FCG.

For information on our programming, or for other general inquiries, please contact the gallery at info@forestcitygallery.com

1025 Elias Street, London, Ontario, N5W 3P6, Canada

Forest City Gallery is situated on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lenape, Huron-Wendat and Attawandaron peoples, which has been a site of human activity for over 10,000 years. The local First Nation communities of this area include Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Munsee Delaware Nation. In the region, there are eleven First Nations communities and a growing Indigenous urban population. Forest City Gallery acknowledges the longstanding relationships that Indigenous Nations have to this land, as they are the original caretakers, and we acknowledge historical and ongoing injustices that Indigenous Peoples endure in Canada.

To acknowledge this traditional territory is to recognize its longer history, one predating the establishment of the earliest European colonies. We also acknowledge the colonial frameworks within which Forest City Gallery operates and the need to identify and remove barriers on an ongoing basis.

The works presented here are Copyright © 2025 Les Ramsay and Jessica Joyce. Parties may not distribute, modify, transmit, download, copy, or use the materials in our print and digital publications for public or commercial purposes, or for personal gain, without express written permission of the artist, author and Forest City Gallery. Any unauthorized use of these materials may violate copyright laws, trademark laws, the laws of privacy and publicity, contract, and communications regulations and statutes and any other applicable laws.

