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art review: *Plein Air Peconic*



By Sabrina C. Mashburn

In the early 19th Century, a group of French painters led by Claude Monet and Edouard Manet, moved from the hustle and bustle of Paris to the sun-dappled countryside. Frustrated with their inability to capture the soft golden light's effect from memory, they slung their easels across their backs, put their paints in their pockets, and began to paint "en plein air," capturing the light they loved and revolutionizing art in the process.

Eighty years later, another group of artists, led by Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, were similarly constricted by city life, and ventured out into the then-rural landscape of Long Island; and although these Abstract Expressionists stayed in their studios, the beautiful landscapes and honest living of Long Island helped them to create some of the best works of their careers.

The winemakers on the East End often refer to our climate as Bordeaux-like, and artists who live and work here will tell you that the light and landscape here is some of the purest and most beautiful in the world. However, in the past twenty years, so much of the exquisite farmland and marshland has been filled in and developed that these beautiful landscapes are being lost forever.

The Peconic Land Trust is trying to stop it. And, calling upon the genius of artists to reveal the perfection in the light of the East End, just as the Hudson River School did for the Hudson River Valley, and the Impressionists did for the French Countryside, the

Peconic Land Trust opened twenty-two of its most beautiful private and protected lands for a hardy troupe of Plein Air artists to paint, and thus save, them.

The resulting exhibit, *Plein Air Peconic*, presented at Ashawagh Hall last week, was hung in the French salon style, with little gold-framed canvasses cluttering the walls, and lovely paintings and photographs covering every inch of space. And though all of the paintings were lovely, perhaps due to their subject, many were surprisingly good. Although some of the paintings were created on the tops of cars, and in artists' hands, sans easel, in under an hour before the light faded, they are precisely painted and capture not only the look, but the feeling, of some of the East End's wildest wetlands and verdant farms.

In keeping with the tradition of the Plein Air artists, many of the painters ventured out together, painting the same scene from different perspectives, and learning together how to capture the elusive colors of the East End. Although many of the artists in the exhibit had painted "en plein air" before, they had never gone out together, and the artists themselves remarked how much more beautiful their work had become through the collaborative process. Casey Anderson explained that looking at another artist's painting of the same subject "shows you how to see" the scene from their perspective. For the exhibition's viewers, these magnificent places truly came to life when viewed from more than one artist's perspective, and at different times of day. Just as Monet's haystacks materialize, not as combinations of colors, but as real objects, when the entire series is viewed, the little red barn with a yard full of sheep seems more familiar with each artist's picture.

Some of the most remarkable canvasses were produced by Aubrey Grainger; Grainger's work captures the moment of exhale at the closing of a long day at a working East End Farm, treating these farmscapes as delicately and attentively as Monet treated his haystacks. However, Grainger's oeuvre is not limited to the farm, and *View from Scallop Pond* is an equally perfect depiction of a Hamptons home nestled neatly into a clump of trees on a waterfront. Casey Anderson is also a master of landscape, and her *Bright Dune* and *Farming by The Sea* pictures showcase the East End as we all dream about it, on a bright, hot summer day with a gentle ocean breeze. Susan D'Alessio's work captures yet another mood of our ever-changing climate, with wind whipping over Fowler Farm and blackening skies hovering above the tree line over the Gatherers at Quail Hill.

The photographers highlighted the vitality of their medium by choosing avant-garde angles and dramatic textures, thus distinguishing their work as a fresh, new view of Long Island. The most striking photographs were taken by Katherine Szoka, whose modern pictures of historic landscapes highlighted the notion that, although the history of the land must be preserved, our landscape will always be changing, living and growing.

Although art cannot save the world, the artists who participated in this show are trying to save a small piece of it, so that future generations can experience the East End's beauty themselves, and perhaps create art of their own. Some of these artists have participated in shows with similar aims, such as Ashawagh Hall's August show to benefit the Nature Conservancy, but most of them had never had the opportunity to

paint on pristine, protected land before. Painter Susan D'Alessio remarked that "being able to see some of these sights was so spectacular; this became new vistas for all of us. It just broadened our horizons." Not only has this experience brought these lands to the public's attention, but the artists who painted them have all been influenced by the East End's inspirational natural beauty. Joanne Rosco explained that "working for the preservation of land has become very important to all of us."

Those of us who are not artists can work towards preserving what is left of Long Island's farms and wetlands by supporting the Peconic Land Trust, either by buying a painting, calling (631) 283-3195 or visiting www.PeconicLandTrust.org to learn more about how to save our delicate ecosystems before they are gone.

Editor's note: Plein air Peconic was conceived and organized by Gordon Matheson, a Southampton Plein Air Painter. Matheson and Tom Steele, an East Hampton photographer have organized six successful art shows that have benefited local art conservation groups and helped to raise the land conservation consciousness of many east end visitors and residents.