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The Power of Artwork on The East End

The Plein Air Peconic artists join forces with The Peconic Land Trust to preserve our treasured Island.

by Joanne Schenker | posted January 2008

The Plein Air Peconic is a collaborative of 13 Long Island artists dedicated to helping preserve our precious natural resources by donating proceeds from their work to The Peconic Land Trust PTL, (www.peconiclandtrust.org), a nonprofit organization established in 1983 by John V. H. Halsey and a group of local residents to ensure the protection of Long Island's working farms and natural lands. The artists participating in Plein Air Peconic are founder Gordon Matheson, as well as Ellen Watson, Casey Chalem Anderson, Susan D'Alessio, Terry Elkins, Aubrey Grainger, Gail Kern, Scott Hewett, Michele Margit, Joanne Rosko, Eileen Dawn Skretch, Tom Steele, and Kathryn Szoka.

The Plein Air Peconic was conceived in 2005 by artist Gordon Matheson and Peconic Land Trust Vice President, Rebecca Chapman. The Trust enables the artists to spend considerable time in the preserves and open spaces of the East End, painting and photographing private properties not seen by the general public. This past October, PLT announced the opening of Plein Air Peconic II, the second exhibition originating from the collaboration. The exhibit, held at the Wallace Gallery, in East Hampton, reinforces the need to save as much land as possible from the massive development the East End is experiencing.

En plein air, a French expression meaning "in the open air," is mainly used to describe the act of painting outdoors. Working in this environment also plays a prominent role in photography. As photographer Ellen Watson explains, "I find it inspiring to be out on these open vistas; it fills me with real gratitude to be in the moment." Having grown up in the Midwest, Watson says the East End brings her back to her roots. She reminisces, "I love the flat lands that go on for miles. I'm comforted by these types of views, so when I moved out here I felt like I'd landed in heaven."

Unfortunately, within only a few years of her move, a great deal of farmland on the East End had been developed. Watson's passion to conserve the land is evident in her work. "There is nothing like taking the time to be out in the middle of a field, lying on your back, looking at the sky with mammoth sunflowers swaying overhead," she explains. "We should take care of this place [the East End] so that we can continue to experience this; so that generations after us will have this to marvel at in the future."

Now in its 25th-anniversary year, PLT is planning for Plein Air Peconic III to be another outstanding installation. In addition to the gallery showing, the Trust will once again feature The Traveling Exhibition. After its heralded success in 2007, where it was shown in libraries across both the north and south forks, it will continue to other East End venues in 2008.

2008 Exhibitions

April 26–27 at Ashawagh Hall, Springs Fireplace Road, East Hampton

May 2–29 at Quogue Library, with a “meet the artists” reception on Saturday, May 3, from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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