



Into Plein Air: Artists show for the Peconic Land Trust

When Gordon Matheson first came to the East End more than 30 years ago, he was struck by the unspoiled vistas and the pastoral views that defined this rural place by the sea.

“I’ve been out here since the mid-70s,” says Matheson. “I spent a lot of time riding my bike and driving my car around — gas was cheaper then. I was originally a country boy from North Carolina. I just loved the outdoors. I loved all the farms and open marshes.”

“I took early retirement and decided to paint because I loved the landscapes here so much,” adds Matheson, a self-taught painter. “I couldn’t afford one of the 100 acres properties, but realized if I painted it, I could bring it home.”

Many of those views that Matheson enjoyed have since been lost — victims of the unending need for expansion that has defined human existence for thousands of years.

But it’s not all bad news — there have been some successes in preserving landscapes that remain on the East End. Three years ago, a group of East End artists, including Matheson, formed Plein Air Peconic, a unique alliance with the Peconic Land Trust, an organization which works to save rural parcels under threat of development.

The artists realized that the scenic vistas they loved to paint and photograph were rapidly evaporating. Their collaboration with the Peconic Land Trust was a way to heighten awareness of the organization's work – and its importance to the artistic community of the East end.

This weekend the 12 artists will open “Plein Air Peconic III,” their third annual Columbus Day show.

“It’s the big magilla,” explains Matheson.

After shows in East Hampton and Amagansett, Plein Air Peconic comes to Sag Harbor for the first time with this exhibit, which is being hosted by the Grenning Gallery. An opening reception will be held at the gallery, 90 Main Street, Sag Harbor, this Saturday from 5 to 8 p.m. The show remains on view through October 18.

“Our intention was to move the shows around,” explains Matheson. “We would like to do Southampton or Bridgehampton next year.”

Plein Air Peconic also does a smaller spring show every year at Ashawagh Hall in Springs. A portion of all the group's shows benefits the Peconic Land Trust. There is also a traveling exhibition that pairs the artists' work with educational information on the Land Trust.

“We’re small potatoes but we’re raising public consciousness,” notes Matheson. “Most shows have over 500 or 600 people come through.”

“Every little sound or image bite makes them think about the conservation. It’s why we try to make such nice brochures and invitations so that people think about it each time.”

Plein Air Peconic includes nine painters — Casey Chalem Anderson, Susan D’Alessio, Terry Elkins, Aubrey Grainger, Gail Kern, Michele Margit, Gordon Matheson, Joanne Rosko, Eileen Dawn Skretch, and three photographers — Tom Steele, Kathryn Szoka, and Ellen Watson.

“All the painters are painterly realists,” says Matheson. “There’s a little wiggle room, but that’s the center.”

The focus for Plein Air Peconic shows is, as its name implies, the pastoral views of the area — specifically parcels that have been directly saved by the Peconic Land Trust.

“For these shows, 50 percent of the work is of places that have been preserved by the Land Trust,” notes Matheson. “That’s the number I give the artists to aim for. The traveling exhibitions are all Land Trust projects.”

A quick glance at the work in this show makes it easy to see why the artists are so passionate about preserving the local views. One of Matheson's landscapes depicts the

dunes by Sagg Pond. The scene is eerily reminiscent of the work of another plein air painter from the area — William Merritt Chase — whose paintings of Shinnecock date to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Perhaps it's a testament to the power of preservation that such a scene can still be found today.

There is even a figure in the scene that at first glance appears to be from Victorian times. But in fact, Gordon explains that it is actually fellow Plein Air Peconic painter and Sag Harbor resident Casey Anderson who was working alongside Matheson on one of her own paintings.

“One of the advantages of working with the Land Trust is they will get us into private property if we want to go somewhere or they suggest it, like the Blair Preserve at Sagg Pond,” says Matheson. “It helps them show the public what they're doing.”

Matheson recalls a few years back that he was given permission to paint in the pasture at Mecox Dairy Farm. He decided to do a large 20" x 40" painting and ended up spending a lot more time in that pasture than he bargained for.

“That painting took three years,” grins Matheson. “I did it in early May when the foliage was starting off. I worked for about a week then it started raining. When the rain was finished, it was totally different.”

The following May, Matheson finished the background for the painting. But he had a new problem.

“I couldn't get the cows to stand still. So I did those this year,” says Matheson. “The cows were interesting. When you're painting, the cows all come and stand right in front of you.”

Matheson notes that he isn't just hanging out in the fields with cows. Often, the Plein Air Peconic artists will agree to go to a location and work together — like he and Anderson did at Sagg Pond.

“The photographers go out early in the morning, but it takes us a little longer — like three years — to finish a painting,” says Matheson. “The painters go a few individually or in groups of two or three. We'll also plan days to go to places like Quail Hill where all nine of us will get there.”

One of Matheson's favorite spots to paint is Scallop Pond in North Sea. It's an area ripe with saved views and looks out onto two different Land Trust preserves, plus a Nature Conservancy parcel.

While many art shows on the East End also raise funds for good causes, Matheson notes that the Plein Air Peconic collaboration with the Land Trust is one that has developed into a true partnership between the two groups.

“One of the things that is very different about Plein Air Peconic is that we have a year round permanent relationship with the Peconic Land Trust,” notes Matheson, adding that often non-profit organizations and galleries come together for a show and then, “go their separate ways for a year.”

“I work with them constantly,” he adds. “They use our art for note cards that they sell or give to donors, all of those are of preserves.”

New for 2009, notes Matheson, will be Peconic Land Trust calendars featuring paintings by Plein Air Peconic artists of the Land Trust’s preserves.

“This is the first time we’ve done it,” he says. “I think they will really do well.”

Above: “Plein Air Dunes (Sagg Pond)” Gordon Matheson, acrylic/canvas, 14 x 18 inches