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Nature and Art: A Perfect Pair

By Elizabeth Fasolino

(10/02/200) The light and landscape of the East End have long been a boon to artists. Now, a group of East End artists has teamed up with the Peconic Land Trust to return the favor.

In the tradition of 19th-century romantic landscape painters whose work reflected the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution, 13 local artists, under the collective name Plein Air Peconic, are using their work to draw attention to the beauty and fragility of the East End's environment and to the importance of preserving its land.

"I love the art out here," said Rebecca Chapman, the vice president of philanthropy for the Peconic Land Trust. "I thought that there was a natural symbiotic relationship between the arts community and what we do."

Local artists agreed. Kathryn Szoka, a photographer and co-owner of Canio's Books in Sag Harbor, said that she was quick to sign on, citing Ms. Chapman's vision of the relationship between art and activism. "Rebecca feels that artists can play an important role in helping to preserve the landscape by guiding people to see it as more precious, and with a fresh eye," Ms. Szoka explained.

When Ms. Chapman first moved to the East End from Michigan, she steeped herself in the art on display in galleries and museums. In 2004, she approached Gordon Matheson, a landscape painter from Water Mill, to see if he might be interested in helping her find local artists to donate work to a raffle for the Peconic Land Trust's Farm and Fields charity event, which highlights the preserved lands and working farms of eastern Long Island.

Landscape portrait commissions proved to be hot-ticket items, inspiring Ms. Chapman and Mr. Matheson to find a way to keep the collaboration going.

Last Columbus Day weekend, the group's first show, "Plein Air Peconic," opened at Ashawagh Hall in Springs, with 10 percent of the sales going to the Peconic Land Trust. "Forty-five or 46 paintings sold," Ms. Chapman said. "It was a huge success." Tomorrow "Plein Air Peconic II" will open at the Wallace Gallery in East Hampton.



Gordon Matheson

Michele Margit, a member of Plein Air Peconic, on land in Quogue that has been conserved by the Peconic Land Trust

Plein air is a French phrase that means open air. Plein-air painting, traditionally done outdoors, originated during the same period that saw newly constructed factories, which were built on land once used for farming, belching coal across a backdrop of rolling hills and valleys.

Nature is the focus of plein-air painting, it is not a backdrop for a story in the foreground. John Constable, the 19th-century British landscape painter known for painting tempestuous skies and arboreal temples, was an early disciple of the style. And his contemporary, Theodore Rousseau, founded the Barbizon School named after the dense forests in the suburbs of Paris, where he traveled to capture more primitive examples of nature than could be found in city parks. Plein-air painting traditionally documents the transitional nature of perception, and the immediacy of a moment, and is a predecessor of Impressionism.

But context is not necessary to appreciate plein-air painting. More than anything else it celebrates the pristine beauty of undeveloped land.



Joanne Rosko, Aubrey Grainger, Gail Kern, Gordon Matheson, Casey Anderson, Susan D'Alessio, Eileen Skretch, Terry Elkins, and Scott Hewett at Sagg Pond. Their work will be reproduced on note cards and a calendar the sales of which will benefit the Peconic Land Trust.

Mr. Matheson, who brought the group of artists together originally, began painting because he wanted something “modern” for the suite of offices that came with his promotion to creative director at a textile firm.

But over the years his taste and skills evolved from the abstraction associated with contemporary art to an homage to landscapes of the 19th century. (His favorite artist is Francis A. Silva,

“My work involved a lot of travel,” he said in his studio last month. “I went to Europe and Asia, and on weekends everything was closed, so I’d go to the museums. I spent a lot of time in museums. My wife would say it wasn’t a trip to Europe unless I brought home ten pounds of art books.”

After taking early retirement, Mr. Matheson settled full time in Springs where he had bought a house with his wife in 1977. He quickly outgrew his infatuation with golfing and fishing, and began taking classes

at the Art Barge in Napeague with Ralph Carpentier.

“I wasn’t interested in painting contemporary or abstract work — doing good landscapes was a challenge,” he said. “I spent untold hours biking with my wife and we fell in love with the landscape, especially the big vistas. It takes a long time to get the feeling of a spot.”

“I’m more like a Barbizon crossed with a Luminist,” he added, referring to two different schools of 19th-century landscape painters. “When Rebecca asked me to help document land the preserve was conserving, I spoke with Tom Steele, Casey Chalem Anderson, Aubrey Grainger, and Terry Elkins, and the feeling was good about working together. Now we work closely with the Peconic Land Trust all year long. It’s a perfect synergy.”

This spring the collaborative initiative got a boost when Terry Wallace, the owner of the Wallace Gallery in East Hampton, went to a show at the Water Mill Museum where work by group members Eileen Dawn Skretch, Ms. Grainger, Joanne Rosko, and Susan D’Alessio was on view.

“I like American painting from 1870 to 1940,” Mr. Wallace said recently. “But when Aubrey told me about the Plein Air Peconic painters it intrigued me. It is only the second organized group of painters on the East End of Long Island.”

Mr. Wallace, who curated “Caroline Bell and the Peconic Bay Impressionists” at the Suffolk County Historical Society in Riverhead last year, agreed to donate his gallery for a show of the group’s work. “I’d work for nothing,” he said. “It’s my vocation. If at the end of the year I have a few extra dollars, that’s good. I hope the show launches these painters, and helps the foundation.” Mr. Wallace is also underwriting the cost of a catalog for the show.

Other artists in the Plein Air Peconic group include Scott Hewett, Ellen Watson, Michele Margit, and Gail Kern.

Ms. Szoka, who has been chronicling in photographs the development of the East End since 1983, said that the project has given her a more hopeful perspective. “Over the years I got a little depressed watching the land disappear as the area got built up,” she said. “Now, through Plein Air Peconic, I can document the land that is being preserved.”

The Wallace Gallery will host a reception for the artists on Saturday between 5 and 8 p.m., and the paintings will be on view through Oct. 29.